

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 529

UD 026 516

AUTHOR Wheelock, Anne
TITLE The Way Out: Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools. A Report by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center.
INSTITUTION Massachusetts Advocacy Center, Boston.
SPONS AGENCY Carnegie Corp. of New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 124p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Failure; Attendance; Attendance Patterns; Demonstration Programs; *Dropout Prevention; Dropouts; Educational Change; Grade Repetition; *High Risk Students; *Middle Schools; Minority Group Children; Personal Narratives; *School Activities; *School Holding Power; School Organization; *School Policy; Secondary Education; Student Promotion; Suspension; Urban Schools; Withdrawal (Education)

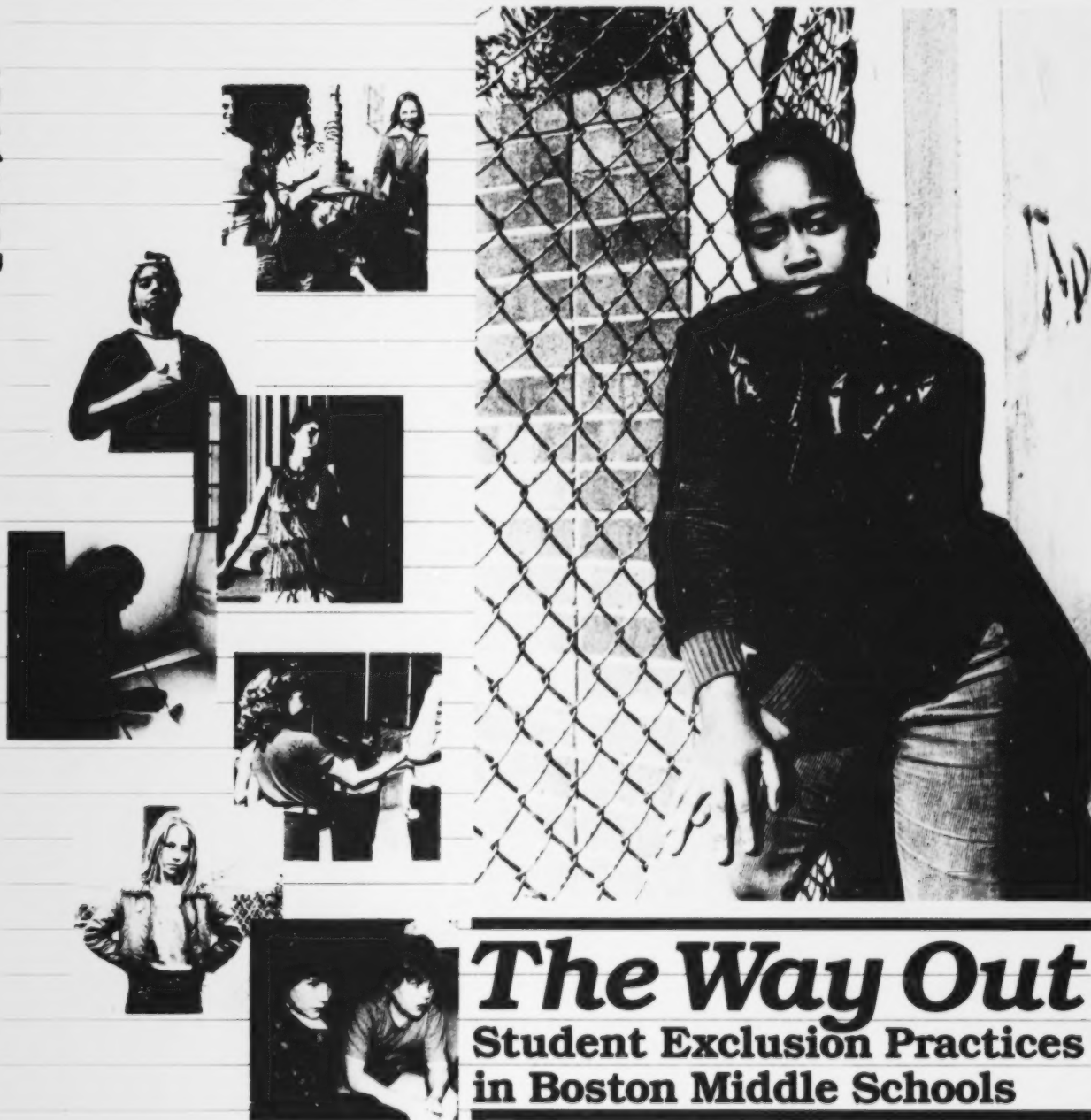
IDENTIFIERS *Boston Public Schools MA

ABSTRACT

Practices of attendance, suspension, and non-promotion in middle schools in Boston (Massachusetts) encourage at-risk students to drop out. School policies and practices, student data, and interviews with at-risk students were reviewed to determine which practices encourage disengagement from school. Personal narratives are included. Major findings include the following: (1) one out of every five students does not attend school 85 percent of their time enrolled; (2) the percent of non-promoted students has increased; (3) one out of every 10 students is suspended annually; (4) Black and Hispanic students have higher rates of absenteeism, non-promotion, and suspension than the general school population. The McKinley Middle School is used as an example of the failure of the Boston schools' policies on suspension. Reform should include the following: (1) flexible scheduling; (2) interdisciplinary teams; (3) exploratory interdisciplinary curriculum; and (4) guidance counseling. Successful programs include the following: (1) RECAP; (2) Boston Student Human Services Collaborative; (3) cluster organization; (4) Project Promise; (5) Mackey Mosaic Summer Institute; and (6) Learning by Earning/Caring by Sharing. Recommendations are included for long-range reform and changes in specific policies and practices. Statistical data are included on numerous tables. The appendixes include the following: (1) a Summary of Data Collected; (2) an Explanation of the Data; and (3) a list of additional sources of information. A bibliography by topic of 68 references is also included. (FMW)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED303529



The Way Out

Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools

A Report by
the Massachusetts
Advocacy Center

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Stephen Bix
MA Advocacy Center

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD026516

Project Director: Anne Wheelock
Written by: Anne Wheelock
Statistical Analysis: Cheryl Almeida
Design/Production: Mia Saunders/
Sarah Doyle
Typesetting: Xanadu Graphics
Printing: Shea Brothers
Photographs: Joan Albert
Log School
National Coalition of
Advocates for Students
Ellen Shub
Walter S. Silver
Somerville Media
Action Project
Phil Spring
Leslie Starobin
United Way

The photographs contained in this report are for illustrative purposes only. They bear no relationship between a particular child and the text. Case studies contained in the report are real. Names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The Way Out

Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools

**A Report by
the Massachusetts
Advocacy Center**

November 1986

The Massachusetts Advocacy Center, established in 1973 as an outgrowth of the Task Force on Children Out of School, Inc. represents children's interest before state and local bodies which legislate, regulate and deliver human services to children. The Center acts to strengthen progressive legislative mandates and to close the gap between those requirements and actual service delivery in the fields of education, child welfare and child health.

The Center uses a multi-strategic approach to problem solving. Administrative negotiation, regulation writing, case advocacy, public education, litigation are all employed when necessary. Moreover, participation on public task forces gives the Center input into executive branch rule making and policy proceedings.

The Center operates as a nonprofit, tax exempt, independent public interest organization supported by contributions and foundation grants.

Board of Directors

J. Larry Brown, Chairman
Susanna Alvarez, M.D.
Jeannette Atkinson
Gary Bellow, Esq.
Charles C. Cabot, Jr., Esq.
Steven Cohen, Esq.
William I. Cowin, Esq.
Gunnar Dybwad
Jesse Fillman, Esq.
Frank Garfunkel, Ph.D.
Arnold Hiatt
Ambrose Jearld
James Jennings
Hubert E. Jones
Lawrence Kotin, Esq.
Peter Linkow
Sonia Nieto
Anne Peretz, M.S.W.
Allan Rodgers, Esq.
Richard Rowe
Albrecht Saalfeld, Esq.
Patricia Squire
Geraldine Zetzel

Staff

Stephen R. Bing, Executive Director
Grace G. Healey, Deputy Director
Cheryl A. Almeida
Helen A. Brown, Esq.
Franna Diamond
Cindy Dow
Anne Lafferty
Julia K. Landau, Esq.
Norma Lindsay
Thomas A. Mela, Esq.
Margaret E. Sargent
Irving Shepard
Anne Wheelock
Alice Williams

Sources of Financial Support

This report, the research which made it possible and the follow-up activities engendered by it are supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. We especially want to express our gratitude to our program officers at the Carnegie Corporation, Vivian Stewart and Diane August.

Other sources of financial support for the Massachusetts Advocacy Center are:

The Boston Foundation
The Clark Foundation
The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust
The Faxon Company
The Lotus Philanthropy Program,
Lotus Corporation
Stride-Rite Charitable Trust
The United Way of Massachusetts Bay
The Zayre Corporation

Recent past supporters of the Massachusetts Advocacy Center to whom we are deeply indebted are:

The Godfrey Hyams Trust
The Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation
The New World Foundation

The findings and recommendations contained in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of current or past funding sources.

This report is dedicated to the memory of Nancy Lazarus, a long time board member of the Massachusetts Advocacy Center. Nancy, through her tireless commitment to the public good, defined forever—for those who knew her—the concept of public citizen.

We also dedicate this report to the future of Boston school children. These students, although they did not know Nancy, surely benefited from the fact that she was their friend.

Foreword

Our quest will not have ended until the tragic and indefensible situation we have found is corrected, whether it takes one year, five years or more. . . . So we continue a journey which must not end with failure but must meet with success in the interest of the precious youth of our community.

Sixteen years ago the Task Force on Children Out of School concluded the introduction of its first report, *The Way We Go To School: The Exclusion of Children in Boston*, with the above statement. Our quest for equity and excellence in public education has taken us beyond Boston to school reform at both the state and federal level. We have focused on special education, bilingual education, race and sex discrimination in the public schools, and more recently on the status of education for children of refugees and recent immigrants.

We have, however, never lost sight of the fact that our origins were formed by an abiding concern for children in the Boston Public Schools, by the belief that these children need and deserve the very best education we as a society can provide. While we have changed our name to the Massachusetts Advocacy Center and while we have expanded our focus to include other basic needs of children, this first concern has never diminished.

Indeed it burns more brightly now. This report is our latest effort to meet our original goal and obligation. The report focuses on Boston's middle schools. It does so for many reasons but most particularly because of one simple fact. The Boston Public School system produces nearly as many school dropouts as it does school graduates. If the school system were an industrial facility with such a sorry production record, it would long ago have been restructured from top to bottom.

We believe, as the report demonstrates, that the dropout problem must be addressed at the middle school level. It is here where students make fundamental decisions about their future, and it is here where policies and practices of the system designed to help these students have their most powerful impact. Accordingly, we must change the middle schools if we are to change the record. Nothing else will do.

The central strength of this report is the analysis of data relating to the operation of the middle schools. We present, for all to comprehend, the impact of certain school practices on the students the schools are mandated to serve. In turn, we relate that data to the best available research on the proper operation of middle schools. The data analysis and the research together have formed the basis for the recommendations we submit at the end of the report.

We submit this report, its findings and recommendations to the public at a time filled with opportunity. Public education in general, and the Boston Public Schools in particular, can benefit from a rebirth of concern by the entire community. A recent poll conducted by Westinghouse Broadcasting Corporation reveals that 72% of the public would support increased financing for public education. In Boston, the business, human services, and public interest communities are investing enormous energy in efforts to improve our schools. And at the state level, an education reform bill has been passed which will provide additional resources and commitment to the Boston schools.

Neither we nor anyone else concerned about public education in Boston can afford to miss this opportunity. Equally important, we cannot afford to do the wrong things in the name of school reform. For example, two of the practices in the Boston middle schools identified in this report as putting children at risk of dropping out—attendance rules and retention at grade level—were widely marketed as reforms which would restore excellence to the school system. These practices were adopted with virtually no consultation with those affected: parents and students. This failure has resulted in the sorry state of affairs described in our study.

We need to remind ourselves continually that all children are entitled to go to school, all children are entitled to an equitable and excellent education. Any policy or practice which undermines that entitlement must be eliminated. If not, society will be the loser generally, and specifically, children whose one opportunity for an improved life is education will bear the most severe consequences.

Moreover, our analysis and recommendations give voice to those who have not been heard before. We have listened to parents, students, and education activists who seek nothing less than a decent, fair education for all of Boston's children. All our recommendations focus on the need for systemic or institutional reform. All insist that the schools must change if they are to educate the students entrusted to them.

For some who have followed recent discussion about public education, this report may come as a surprise. We have consciously and explicitly rejected any notion that the problems in public education are the students themselves. This analysis always points to one characteristic or another about the students which accounts for failure. Some argue that the social or economic status of the children is responsible for the problems. Others suggest that some lethal array of alcohol or drug abuse, adolescent pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, family breakdown, or handicapping conditions are the principal reasons for school dropouts. Others suggest that far too many children come to school unable to speak English. In short, if the students would change, manage to secure themselves a two parent family, lift themselves out of poverty, and otherwise conform to some hypothetical norm, schools would succeed.

This analysis is not only far-fetched, it ignores reality. The majority of the student population in Boston share one or more of the identified "deficits." Moreover, as this report shows in detail, school practices themselves are the culprit, all the more so because they operate as if these students should come to school without any of the problems everyone knows they may have.

Furthermore, while the difficulties students experience are indeed serious and require solution, it is not clear whether these problems are causes or effects of dropping out. Some may be both. For example, one half of all adolescents who become pregnant do so *after* they drop out. Indeed, many more children are at risk in the middle grades for attendance and non-promotional reasons than become pregnant while still in school. In sum, this report argues that the schools must be organized and administered so as to serve the population they actually have, not the population they wished they had.

Not to do so will condemn nearly half of our students to failure. Failure not only in school but in their daily lives. This would mean that we all have failed. And the failure would have many facets: economic, social and political. As we said in 1970, we cannot fail. Therefore we will not fail.

Stephen R. Bing
Executive Director
November, 1986

Acknowledgments

We especially wish to thank the students who shared their school experiences with us. In addition, we are grateful to the human service workers, advocates for public education, and community leaders who took the time to reply thoughtfully to our surveys.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank the following individuals who made important contributions to this report: Mary Black, Judy Burnette, Joe Carpineto, Anne Carr, James Caradonio, Abby Colihan, DeeDee Costello, Stephen Driscoll, Philip Dushku, Leah Flanagan, Dan French, Roberto Gomez, Earl Greene, Michael Griffin, Stephanie Johnson, Karen Kane, Tracey Kaplan, Carol Katz, Cindy Laba, Diane Lande, Jean Sullivan McKeigue, Robin Michaels, Wendy Puriefoy, Peggy Wagner, Kay Walsh, Jeff Wilkinson, and Elizabeth Wood.

We also wish to thank the following individuals from Boston Public Schools who assisted us in obtaining data, clarified school policies, and provided us with insights into school programs: Richard Allen, Kenneth Caldwell, Yohel Camayd-Freixas, Rudolph Crew, Ted Dooley, Michael Fung, Mary Grassa O'Neill, Robert Hayden, Diana Lam, Joseph McDonough, Kim Marshall, David Noriega, Michael Robinson, Ronald Spratling, Gregory Thomas, and Jack Yessayan.

We wish to acknowledge the special contributions of a team of readers who read and critiqued this document in draft form: Frank Garfunkel, Boston University Graduate School of Special Education; Kenneth Haskins, the Principals' Center, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Harold Howe II, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Hubert E. Jones, Boston University School of Social Work. The final version of this report does not necessarily reflect the views of these readers.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
1 MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AT RISK	13
2 ATTENDANCE IN BOSTON MIDDLE SCHOOLS: AN ILLUSION OF PROGRESS	21
3 NON-PROMOTION: ADDING INSULT TO INJURY	35
4 MIDDLE SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS: FROM PUSHOUTS TO DROPOUTS	49
5 THE MCKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL: A GAUGE OF BOSTON'S CONCERN	67
6 MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM: THERE IS A WAY, BUT IS THERE THE WILL?	75
7 PROMISING PRACTICES IN BOSTON MIDDLE SCHOOLS	87
8 A STITCH IN TIME: FUNDAMENTAL GUIDELINES FOR LONG RANGE REFORM IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS	101
9 POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE	107
APPENDICES	111
BIBLIOGRAPHY	115

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Many observers have become increasingly concerned about a 43% dropout rate in the Boston Public Schools. This concern has generated debate in many circles and a renewed interest in all segments of the community in public education.

Within the context of renewed interest in students at risk and recent research about middle schools, this study has set out to describe the role middle schools play in the complicated phenomenon of dropping out. We wanted to understand how school system policies might discourage middle school students from completing their education and, indeed, push students to the brink of dropping out of school. We report our findings about ways in which current practice undermines student commitment to school because we have listened to effective schools researchers who maintain that one of the cardinal characteristics of effective schools is that they are as eager to avoid things that do not work as they are committed to implementing things that do.

Consequently, the first task of this inquiry has been to identify students at risk because of their experiences in Boston middle schools, to count them, to locate them in individual schools, and to talk with some of them in order to determine the extent of the need for immediate remedial and dropout prevention services. As a result of our review, we know that an increasing number of middle school students repeat a middle grade every year. We know, too, that 1,000 students in middle schools are suspended once every year. On top of that, we know that hundreds of middle grades students are truant from school more than one half of the school year. Indeed, students who are disengaged in middle schools might just as well be called dropouts, even though their names continue to appear on official enrollment records. Because of attendance, suspension, and non-promotion practices in our middle schools, these students are put at risk, and thousands of learning days are lost.

We have also identified schools where symptoms of high non-promotion rates, low attendance rates, and high suspension rates indicate that the school experiences of students in those schools are contributing to student disengagement, alienation, and the belief that "school is not for me." These middle schools are failing. While they do not show high dropout rates for the simple reason that only a few students enrolled are old enough to withdraw formally from school, these schools do not exert the holding power necessary to convince all students that it is worth their while to stay in school.

We know that some schools are well-aware of their own failings. During the course of this project, we also learned of efforts schools are making to engage all students in their education. This report describes some of the "home-grown" programs developed in these schools which hold out the promise of enhancing achievement, attendance, and discipline in all middle schools.

The focus of this report is on students at risk. This focus is not meant to imply a lack of interest in the needs of all students in Boston middle schools. To the contrary, it reflects a conviction that organizational reforms which enhance the engagement of the most vulnerable students are reforms that can benefit all students in the school. In strengthening the holding power of schools for students at risk, middle school education for all students in Boston will improve. In the long run, effective middle schools will also be the most effective form of dropout prevention.

What follows is a statement of the basic findings in our study of Boston middle schools. Detailed discussion and analysis appear in the body of the report. In addition, a school-specific data analysis of the practices we have identified as leading to dropping out is available, under separate cover, from the Massachusetts Advocacy Center.

ATTENDANCE IN BOSTON MIDDLE SCHOOLS: AN ILLUSION OF PROGRESS

We call this chapter an illusion of progress because, in fact, the Boston response to school attendance problems aggravates rather than ameliorates the issue of chronic school absence.

1. Systemwide, attendance rates have improved for all middle schools over three years.

While the median school attendance rate in 1982-83 was 81.5, this rate rose to 85.1 in 1983-84 and again to 88.2 in 1984-85. Moreover, rates improved for all racial groups in middle schools systemwide.

2. Attendance rates show wide variations from school to school and by race.

While the range between high and low rates has narrowed considerably for overall attendance, rates broken down by race still show extreme differences both between schools with high rates and schools with low rates and within schools.

3. White students in five middle schools continue to have attendance rates significantly below overall rates for these schools.

While all middle schools by 1984-85 had raised their overall attendance rate to 80% or better, and while the median school attendance rate for white students systemwide had reached 85.4%, attendance for white students at five schools—the Lewenberg, Wilson, Dearborn, Michelangelo, and Mackey—lagged behind the 80% low overall rate for all schools.

4. Hispanic students in at least three schools have not kept up with improvements in overall attendance rates.

While schoolwide attendance rates at the Shaw Middle, Wilson, and Gavin Schools rose steadily from 1982 to 1985, rates for "Other" students in those schools remained below 80%, the lowest rate reported by any school. "Other" students at the Shaw are 89% Hispanic; at the Wilson, 97% Hispanic; and the Gavin, 98% Hispanic.

5. Approximately one out of five middle school students was absent more than 15% of the time enrolled during each of the last two years. Moreover, about 5% of all middle school students were absent more than half the time they were enrolled for these years, based on a four-term average.

These latter students, totaling about 500 each year, have virtually dropped out of school although they have not officially withdrawn.

6. The percentage of students absent 15% or more of their time enrolled increased in 14 of the 22 middle schools between 1984-85 and 1985-86.

While the median percentage systemwide for students absent more than 15% of their time enrolled was 20.9% in 1984-85, this median rose to 21.5% in 1985-86.

7. In 8 out of 22 middle schools, the percentage of students absent more than 20% of their time enrolled increased by two or more percentage points from 1984-85 to 1985-86.

Of all middle schools, the median percentage of students absent more than one fifth of the time enrolled was 15.2% in 1984-85 and 15.4% in 1985-86. Unlike students who may miss meeting attendance standards by only a few days, these students show patterns of chronic absence and are at serious risk.

8. The percentage of students absent 20% or more of their time enrolled increases between the first and fourth school year quarters.

In 1984-85, 84.8% of the students enrolled during the first quarter attended 85% of their time enrolled, while 10.7% were out of school 20% or more. By the fourth quarter, only 75.1% were attending 85% or more of their time enrolled, while 19.2% were out of school 20% or more of that time. A similar pattern prevailed in 1985-86.

9. In two years, only one middle school—the Lewenberg—ended the school year with fewer students frequently absent than when the year began.

As the year progressed, all other schools lost students, as more and more students stayed out more than 20% of the time. In fact, the percentage of students lost to chronic absence over the course of the year actually doubled in nine schools in 1984-85. Moreover, in ten schools in 1984-85, by the fourth quarter, one out of five students was attending school less than 80% of the time. In 1985-86, in all but six schools, first quarter attendance was worse than first quarter attendance the previous year.

10. Out of all the time available for education in 1985-85, 12% of that learning time—totaling 226,190 days in 1984-85 and 209,638 days in 1985-86—was lost systemwide in Boston's middle schools due to school absence.

Moreover, from school to school, the percentage of learning time lost varied considerably, ranging from 8.9% in the Lewenberg School to 17.4% in the Shaw Middle School. Systemwide, this percentage is highest for white students, followed by Hispanic students.

Conclusion

One out of five Boston middle school students does not attend school 85% of their time enrolled. This figure does not include days lost due to suspension. Poor attendance is strongly associated with poor academic performance. Both are strong predictors of dropping out. Current school policies and practices, including Boston's *Student Promotion Policy*, are putting students at risk. Our findings show that these policies need to be the focus for change. In addition, school conditions that make learning difficult for students and contribute to truancy must be the target for reform. Until such changes are made, Boston's dropout rate is likely to remain high.

NON-PROMOTION: ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

Popular "wisdom" identifies non-promotion as a responsible approach to educational difficulty. In fact, retention in grade harms the students, the system, and leads to dropping out. Invocation of the now cliché-ridden horror of "social promotion" simply allows school policy makers to avoid fundamental reform.

1. At the middle school level, the percentage of non-promoted students has increased steadily for three years.

In 1984-85, 1,786 Boston middle schools students were not promoted, up from 1,714 in 1983-84 and from 1,568 in 1982-83. During the 1982-83 school year, the percentage of middle school students held back was 13.5, more than one out of seven students. By 1984-85 this percentage had jumped to 16.8, affecting approximately one out of every six students. In the interim year, this percentage totaled 15.1.

2. While all racial groups have experienced an increase in non-promotion, the percentage of Hispanic students not promoted has increased at twice the rate for all Boston middle school students.

While the rate of increase for non-promotions over three years was 24.4% for all middle school students, the increase for Hispanic students during that period was 49.5%. Data also show a 19.2% increase for black students, and a 21.3% increase for white students.

3. Black middle school students are disproportionately retained in grade.

In each year for three years, blacks consistently represent a greater percentage of all non-promoted students than their representation in the middle school population.

4. Percentages of students not promoted in middle schools vary dramatically from school to school.

For example, in 1984-85, while the percentage of all middle school students not promoted was 16.8, this percentage ranged from a low of 3.6 in the Taft to a high of 34.1 for students at the King. In that same year, similar ranges existed within ethnic groups. For black students, the percentage not promoted ranged from a low of 3.7 at the Taft to a high of 33.6 at the King; for white students, 2.6 at the Lewis to 42.7 at the King; for Hispanics, 4.9 at the Taft to 42.9 at the Cheverus.

5. By 1984-85, five middle schools—the Cheverus, Dearborn, King, Michelangelo, and Wilson—were each holding back more than one out of every five students in their respective schools. These schools collectively accounted for almost 30% (29.8) of all non-promotions, although their enrollment accounted for only 17.6% of the middle school population.

6. Within some individual middle schools, the percentage of students held back varies dramatically by race.

Non-promotion data for many schools show wide disparities between the group experiencing highest chances for promotion and that group experiencing lowest chances of promotion. Such differences call into question the ability of the individual school to provide equal educational opportunity to all students.

7. Certain middle schools show non-promotion by race that are grossly out of proportion to their numbers in the school population.

Like disparities in percentages calculated for racial groups, disproportionate percentages suggest a school climate in which all students do not benefit equally from available resources, attention, and expectations.

8. Middle school students in Boston are at greatest risk of non-promotion in seventh grade.

While percentages of students retained in grade for sixth and eighth graders are lower than the overall percentage for all middle school students, one out of five (21.0%) of all seventh graders were not promoted in 1984-85.

9. In 1984-85, 1,137 middle school students in Boston were two years or more behind their age-appropriate grade.

One of the consequences of holding students back in any grade is that by the middle grades, large numbers of students are older than average for their grade. In Boston, at the end of the 1984-85 school year, 716 students in sixth grade were age 14 or older; 297 in seventh grade were 15 or older; and 152 in eighth grade were 16 or older. As a group, these students represent 10.7% of the overall middle school population and are at severe risk of dropping out. At greatest risk are Hispanic students: 13.3% of Hispanic students are two or more years behind their age-appropriate grade.

Conclusion

Retention in grade does nothing to enhance students' achievement while increasing the likelihood that these students will drop out. Large numbers of students in Boston middle schools are at risk because of non-promotion. Each one of these students now behind appropriate age for grade deserves immediate attention. Indeed, according to the school Department's own *Student Promotion Policy*, they are entitled to remedial services.

In the long run, dropout prevention and retrieval efforts for individual students make little sense if school policies and practices themselves continue to put vulnerable students at risk. Short-term interventions are not likely to reverse the increase in non-promotions in middle schools. Nor is it likely that enough alternative programs can be created to meet the needs of every middle school student experiencing school failure and non-promotion. The numbers of students not achieving are simply too great to convince us that more programs added on to traditional approaches can significantly reverse the dropout trend.

MIDDLE SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS: FROM PUSHOUTS TO DROPOUTS

Suspension from school can reasonably be seen as a message to students that they are not welcome. The use and overuse of this practice raises serious questions about the system's willingness to reach all students and to educate them. Exclusion cannot be viewed as a constructive response.

1. Over 1,000 students are suspended at least once every year from Boston middle schools.

Since 1982-83, the student suspension rate in middle schools has increased slightly.

2. Boston middle schools suspend black students at rates consistently higher than the student suspension rate for middle schools systemwide.

In the past three years, the percentage of black students suspended has consistently ranged between 11% and 12%, compared to the 8.8 to 9.6 range for all middle school students. Moreover, black students are suspended about twice as often as white students. In school years 1983-84 and 1984-85, rates for Hispanic students were also reported as higher than the rate for all middle school students systemwide.

3. Boston middle schools are suspending a consistently larger percentage of Hispanic students every year.

Compared to a 9.1% increase in the student suspension rate for all middle school students in Boston, the increase for Hispanic students suspended over a three-year period has been 39.5%. While in 1982-83, only about one out of every 13 Hispanic students was suspended, by 1984-85, nearly one out of nine Hispanic students in Boston middle schools experienced at least one annual suspension.

4. Boston middle schools suspend black students in numbers disproportionate to their numbers in the middle school population.

While blacks represent half of all middle school students, they consistently represent over 60% of all middle school students suspended: 65.6% in 1982-83; 62.6% in 1983-84; and 62.4% in 1984-85.

5. Approximately 41% of all suspensions in middle schools are repeat suspensions.

The number of individual students suspended is in itself high in Boston's middle schools. In addition, School Department statistics show approximately 1.5 suspensions for every student suspended, indicating that many Boston middle school students experience multiple suspensions. Indeed, 46%, 40%, and 38% (averaging 41%) of all suspensions given were multiple suspensions in 1982-83, 1983-84, and 1984-85, respectively.

6. Student suspension rates—a measure of students' risk of being suspended—vary widely from school to school.

Such variations in student suspension rates indicate differences in responses to student discipline and suggest differences in school climate.

7. Use of multiple suspensions also varies dramatically from school to school.

While the rate of suspension for all Boston middle schools has been relatively stable at an average of 15.5 suspensions for every 100 students over a three-year period, some schools use suspension fewer than ten times each year while others use suspension hundreds of times.

8. Five Boston middle schools have suspended fewer than 5% of their students every year for three years.

In addition to the Taft and Holmes, three other middle schools had student suspension rates under 5% for all three years. These include the Edison, Rogers, and Wilson Schools.

9. Seven middle schools reported three-year average student suspension rates over one and a half times greater than the average rate for all middle schools.

These include the Curley, Roosevelt, Thompson, Edwards, Michelangelo, Timilty, and Mackey Schools.

10. The number of students from these seven schools alone accounts for half of all students suspended in all Boston middle schools across the City.

11. Approximately one half of all black middle school students and two thirds of all Hispanic students suspended come from the seven middle schools with the highest student suspension rates.

While only about one quarter of all black middle school students are enrolled in the seven middle schools with the highest suspension rates, slightly more than half of all black students suspended attend these schools. Even more dramatically, over two thirds of all Hispanic middle school students suspended attend these schools although these schools enroll only about 40% of Hispanic middle school students.

12. Eight middle schools with high suspension rates show black students receiving high proportions of all suspensions.

In these schools, not only is the three-year average suspension rate above the systemwide average of 15.5, but the proportion of suspensions received by black students is ten or more percentage points higher than would be expected based on the percentage of black students in the population. These schools are the Curley, Roosevelt, Irving, Gavin, Edwards, Michelangelo, Timilty, and Mackey.

Conclusion

One out of ten middle grade students is suspended annually in Boston, a practice which puts these students at risk of dropping out. While these students may need special attention and help with their behavior, it is the school climate that needs to be the major focus for school remediation. Rules developed without input of students, teachers who misbehave by name-calling or using abusive language with students, administrators who yell at students, and staff who implement rules unfairly or inconsistently all contribute to student alienation. A curriculum that fails to challenge students and address students' developmental needs, sorting of students into separate classes for "nerds," "repeaters," or "bad kids," teaching approaches that do not actively involve students, and unresolved tensions among staff can all provide fertile ground for student misbehavior that ultimately leads to suspension. Our finding that some schools have successfully established safe, orderly environments for learning leads us to believe that all schools can do so. Improving school climate within a context of meeting developmental needs of all young adolescents should be the first order of business for Boston's middle schools.

THE MCKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL: A GAUGE OF BOSTON'S CONCERN

The McKinley School can easily be seen as a metaphor. The so-called most difficult students are sent here to experience exclusion and failure as part of the educational program.

1. Eight out of ten students at the McKinley Middle School were suspended at least once each year between 1982 and 1985.

While an average 9.1% of students in Boston's conventional middle schools were suspended at least once a year between 1982-85, a disturbing statistic itself, an average 79.5% of students at the McKinley Middle School were suspended at least once a year. McKinley student suspension rates ranged from 87.2 in 1982-83 and 80.0 in 1983-84 to 71.3 in 1984-85 compared to 8.8, 8.9, and 9.6 in middle schools systemwide. During those years, high rates persisted for all racial groups, with student suspension rates for blacks and Hispanics somewhat higher than for whites.

2. Students with special needs at the McKinley Middle School are many more times likely to experience multiple suspensions than all students in traditional middle schools.

While the use of multiple suspensions in Boston middle schools already goes beyond sound educational practice, multiple suspensions are clearly the norm at the McKinley School. In 1982-83, 75% of all McKinley students suspended received more than one suspension. This percentage rose to 89% in 1983-84 and totaled 76% in 1984-85.

3. Most suspensions at the McKinley are related to behavior characteristics of special education students whose emotional needs result in acting out behavior.

Conclusion

The McKinley's suspension statistics raise doubts that the supposed advantages of placement of students with special needs in a segregated setting outweigh the disadvantages. The school's suspension record is not persuasive in showing that the McKinley is successful with the majority of its students, either in helping them learn new behaviors or in promoting the commitment to education that is necessary to prevent dropping out. The long-range harm to students is likely to go unnoticed until students reach the age when they can officially withdraw from school. At that point, it is clear that while the school may have failed, the students are the losers.

MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM: THERE IS A WAY, BUT IS THERE THE WILL?

Taken together, new stages in intellectual development coupled with emerging needs for social development and growth for young adolescents have specific implications for the organization of middle schools. Organizational structures and practices which allow for teaching that complements rather than clashes with the cognitive and developmental characteristics of this age group are hallmarks of good middle schools. These practices also enhance schools' holding power for young people at risk of dropping out. Some of the practices most commonly found in middle schools which adapt their structures to the needs of their students include the following:

Interdisciplinary Teams

According to middle schools educator Dr. Paul George of the University of Florida, "Certain programs, when present, strengthen everything else in the school. In middle schools, it's whatever gives you smallness within bigness." Dr. George's point is that the way in which people are organized to work together is the key feature of an exemplary middle school. Interdisciplinary teams may be called "clusters," "houses," or "schools-within-schools," but their purposes do not change: to reduce the distance between students and teachers, to enhance familiarity and a sense of community within the school, and to integrate subject areas into a cohesive instructional approach.

Exploratory Interdisciplinary Curriculum

In real middle schools that are responsive to the realities of their young adolescent students, the curriculum will look different from that of elementary schools, even when the attention is still focused on basic needs. The difference rests on the attention paid to the developmental needs of students, particularly needs for competence, diversity, opportunities for self-definition and participation in the community, and positive interaction with peers and adults.

Flexible Scheduling

Most citizens think of middle school as a step toward high school, so it seems only natural to move students from one course to another at 45 minute intervals, replicating the traditional high school schedule. Such scheduling, however, is out of step with young adolescents' needs for structure and the opportunity to integrate what they learn in one subject with what they learn in another.

With flexible scheduling as the basis for both a fully functioning interdisciplinary team and an exploratory curriculum, teachers can fully take advantage of young adolescents' abilities to make connections between subjects, stimulating them to see one topic from a variety of disciplines. Finally, since flexible scheduling empowers teachers to decide within their teams how to use their time each day, teachers are no longer slaves to a forty-five minute time block.

Guidance Counseling

Like curriculum, teaching approaches, and scheduling, counseling in middle school evolves from normal developmental needs of students in those schools. Consequently, counseling in grades 6-8 works best when it starts with an understanding that middle schoolers are moving from one life stage into another, engaged in the daily "work" of forming a firm self-identity. Their strivings toward becoming young adults have immediate implications for guidance in middle schools.

Conclusion

We believe that the knowledge exists to transform our underachieving middle schools into middle schools that teach all students basic skills while also addressing basic developmental issues. Because of a variety of unique organizational characteristics, the middle school model has the potential to increase attendance, improve achievement, and reduce suspension.

PROMISING PRACTICES IN BOSTON MIDDLE SCHOOLS

From the beginning of this project, we have assumed that solutions to problems identified in middle schools would be found in Boston Schools themselves. As part of this study we have attempted to identify promising practices, policies, and programs which schools themselves have designed to meet the needs of middle school students at risk. We do so in the belief that the seeds of change lie in "home-grown" solutions that evolve from the real experiences of teachers, principals, and support staff who work in the schools under all the constraints imposed by a bureaucratic urban school system. In identifying promising practices, we also affirm the belief that improving the educational experience for students at risk can enrich the education of all students in the middle school.

Each program listed below is described in detail in the full report.

RECAP

This program operates in 13 middle schools and gives students an opportunity to achieve grade promotions twice in one year. It thereby strikes directly at the relationship between retention at grade level and dropping out.

Boston Student Human Services Collaborative

The Boston Human Services Collaborative is a unique organizational arrangement that provides a vehicle for community-based, city, and state human agencies to deliver services to students inside Boston's schools, including five middle schools.

Cluster Organization in Middle Schools

Clusters are Boston's answer to interdisciplinary teams. They offer an alternative way of organizing middle schools and reflect an understanding of research on effective middle schools.

Project Promise

Project Promise has introduced improved educational practices, not just more hours of the "same old thing," into Boston's middle schools. Highlights of the program are team teaching, interdisciplinary instruction, and flexible scheduling with more time spent on subject matter. Because teachers have had to apply for the program, those selected to work in Project Promise schools—the Timilty, Thompson, and Cleveland—are likely to be teachers who are committed to teaching middle grades youngsters in an innovative way.

Mackey Mosaic Summer Institute

The Institute is a two-week program for all incoming sixth graders. The purpose of the program is to provide a transition for students fresh from elementary school into the unfamiliar environment of the middle school. It is a chance for new students and their parents to get to know their teachers and principal and to begin to form friendships with each other.

During the two-week, four-hour-per-day program, students are exposed to the Mackey's school year program. During the summer, students working in small, consistent groups have a chance to explore all aspects of interdisciplinary learning, culminating in a celebration of their work which takes place the final day.

Learning by Earning/Caring by Sharing

This Gavin School program, designed for 30–35 students at risk who are trained as tutors and then paired with 30–35 students with special needs, reflects a willingness to address the developmental needs of adolescents at risk and a commitment to directing resources toward programs which serve the whole school community.

A STITCH IN TIME: GUIDELINES FOR LONG RANGE REFORM IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

1. Dropout prevention strategies should focus primarily on changing school practices and policies that put students at risk.
2. Dropout prevention programs should focus on broadening and diversifying opportunities in the educational mainstream so that students with a variety of learning styles, paces and needs can experience success.
3. Dropout prevention strategies should be developed on a school-by-school basis with the involvement of teachers, parents, students, administrative staff and community workers at that school.
4. Dropout prevention strategies at the middle grades level must take into account the normal developmental needs of young adolescents.
5. Dropout prevention strategies must acknowledge the broad cultural diversity and richness of Boston's student population.
6. Dropout prevention strategies must include parents in meaningful roles.
7. Dropout prevention strategies should actively collaborate with community-based human service agencies to provide services for at risk students in middle schools and to expand programs offered to all students.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

In the long run, we believe that well-run middle schools which meet the developmental needs of their young adolescent students and which strive to create a non-discriminatory accepting climate will appropriately address attendance, behavioral, and promotion problems. We recommend that Boston Public Schools embark on a long-range process of middle school reform.

In addition, recognizing that existing policies and practices pose barriers to students' success in middle schools, we recommend the following *immediate* changes:

Leadership

1. We recommend the Boston School Committee adopt the fundamental principles which we have proposed for long range reform in middle schools.
2. We recommend that school officials require each middle school to conduct a school-based assessment of existing conditions, practices, and policies which put students at risk in each school.

Attendance

1. We recommend elimination of non-promotion as a response to poor attendance.
2. We recommend early and immediate school response to student absence.
3. We recommend that schools respond to tardiness in ways that do not encourage further attendance problems.
4. We recommend an individualized student assessment for students who are persistently tardy.
5. We recommend that schools devise a system of rewards to acknowledge students whose attendance improves during the school year.
6. We recommend that attendance data be collected and reported by race.
7. We recommend that Boston Public Schools collect and publish attendance information by racial group based on the percentage of time students are absent.

Non-promotion

1. We recommend that non-promotion be eliminated as an option in the middle grades. Students should be placed in age-appropriate situations and provided necessary remedial services to assure acquisition of basic skills.
2. We recommend structural changes in middle schools such as multi-age grouping within clusters, that reduce the stigma of students who are over-age for grade.
3. We recommend the expansion of RECAP services to every middle school and for every middle school student two years or more behind age for grade.
4. We recommend that all students age 16 or older in middle school be immediately offered a place in an alternative program.
5. We recommend that Boston Public Schools include in the annual School Profiles the numbers of students who are behind their age-appropriate grade for two or more years in each middle school.
2. We recommend that schools develop alternatives to suspension—in-school or out-of-school—that emphasize conflict-resolution, problem-solving, and mediation.
3. We recommend that schools be required to report the number of students referred for suspension from each teacher in the school.
4. We recommend that numbers of students referred for in-school suspension be reported by race and referring teacher for each school and that parents be informed of any in-school suspension.
5. We recommend the collection and publication of suspension data based on both the number of suspensions and the number of students suspended in each school.
6. We recommend the collection of suspension data by special education status and immediate review of I.E.P.s of special education students after three suspensions.

Suspension

1. We recommend that out-of-school suspension be used only for students who carry weapons or use drugs in school or where assaultive behavior will result in criminal charges.
2. We recommend that Massachusetts Department of Education and Department of Mental Health officials develop standards of treatment for students.

McKinley Middle School

1. We recommend an immediate and rigorous program audit by the State Department of Education of the McKinley Middle School.
2. We recommend that Massachusetts Department of Education and Department of Mental Health officials develop standards of treatment for students.

Middle School Students At Risk



Nicholas has been out of school for a year. He was 17 when he received a diploma from eighth grade in 1985. While he never withdrew officially from school, he just never showed up in ninth grade. "Five years in middle school was enough," he says. "I'm scared to go to school now because I'm too old. I'm supposed to go to ninth grade, but I'm almost 19. I really should be out of high school."

Nicholas has a mixture of good and bad memories about middle school. His favorite subjects were math and woodworking: "I wanted to do extra math," he reports. "I wanted to keep it all in my head. Sometimes I'd cheat and use my calculator, but I could do most of it in my head. I love to measure things. Without measuring and adding things up, you can't build anything. I used to want to build a house. You need math for that. I never failed math, and I'm really good at woodworking."

Nicholas also remembers good teachers, especially his sixth grade teacher, Mr. S. "We used to tease him," he reports, smiling. "He used to stick up for me. He would teach me how to do math and help me do my social studies homework. I would stay after school and he would help me. I used to go there every day. If you didn't bring in homework, he made you do it in class."

Nicholas met Mr. S. during his second year in sixth grade, having spent a previous sixth grade year in another middle school. In spite of the help of Mr. S., however, Nicholas spent a third year in sixth grade, then passed on to seventh and eighth grades. School was not easy for him, and he remembers so much homework from his seven classes that, he says, "You couldn't finish it all in one night. I'd do the rest the next morning at the bus stop." After-school tutoring helped, he remembers: "That was the best thing they did in school. The tutors were regular teachers and they helped you more. There were three teachers, and if I needed to ask a question, someone would answer me."

Asking questions in regular classes was harder though. Nicholas recalls once asking his teacher a question about perception and reality: "I wanted to know whether what we were seeing—like a blue house—was really blue or whether it was something black and white that someone else had painted blue. I asked that question and there was a kid who embarrassed me. He called me 'Stupid Spic.' And he used to wait outside and beat me up until I made friends with my 'back-ups.' They were big, and some of them smoked marijuana, but I made friends with them so this kid wouldn't beat me up."

Nicholas thinks students learned that name-calling was acceptable from some of the school's teachers. He remembers Mr. R., for example, his eighth grade social studies teacher who, he says, used to "tease kids. He called us 'Stupid' and 'Dumb Puerto Ricans.' He didn't like any of us kids. I remember his room. It was downstairs in the basement near the shops. He beat up on a kid once because he wanted to go to the bathroom."

Nicholas often cut Mr. R.'s class, sometimes retreating to Mr. S.'s class where he was allowed to sit quietly in the back. But when he was caught cutting, he had to stay after school. "You had to write out all the school rules, number one to 100. They had a list: 'No running in the hallways;' 'No smoking—you're gone if you get caught with cigarettes;' 'No eating in class'—or the next morning the rats come out. I know them all." Nicholas reports that he thinks most of the rules are fair. "The principal made them all up. No one complained."

Fair or not, rules became more of a problem for Nicholas. He says, "I used to get suspended right and left." One year he was suspended eight times, three days for each suspension. While he was out he felt "bad" and tried to study at home. For Nicholas, the cause of his suspensions was fighting, behavior he says he finally changed. "I had a teacher I could talk to. He gave me advice, like not to fight back when someone called me a name. If you got into a fight, he wouldn't send you to the principal. He made you stay after school and work for him. Then they changed my class to separate me from a kid who threw a dictionary at me, and they put me part-time in a resource room. I changed too. I calmed down. I realized I couldn't be fighting all the time. I was going to be 18 in the eighth grade."

Not all of his teachers seemed to recognize the change. Nicholas reports, "By the end of eighth grade, I was a pain to the teachers in the school." How did he know? "They told me in just those words," he says.

Nicholas did receive a promotion to ninth grade. "When my report card came in the mailbox and I saw 'Grade 9,' I said, 'Hey, I did it!'" But Nicholas did not receive the promotion without one final unpleasantness: "Before graduation, the principal grabbed some of the kids who wouldn't be in graduation. He took us to our lockers and told us to take our things and go. I had two F's—one in gym, one in social studies—and he said I'd go to ninth grade, but he didn't want me at the graduation party. I don't know why. He knew we would mess it up or something. He did it to me and six more kids and one girl. It was awful. But I said, 'Okay, if you don't want me at your stupid graduation, that's all right with me. I just ignored him.'"

These days Nicholas hangs out with his girlfriend who is still in middle school. Sometimes he babysits for the pre-school children of his girlfriend's sister. He is responsible, gentle, and patient with them and says, "If I had a good job that made good money, I would have a little kid of my own." In the last year, Nicholas has had two jobs. He worked first at a factory in Hyde Park at a \$3.25-an-hour job putting rubber parts on tools. He had a second job for \$5.00 an hour sanding and painting cars at MAACO, a job he left without notice when he mistakenly thought he had been "called" for a \$6.00-an-hour job at a factory making Venetian blinds and to which he could not return when he discovered his mistake.

Nicholas would like to go to a school "like English High" where his cousin went and reported "it's the best school around." In his ideal school, he'd study math, woodworking, and a little social studies." And he says emphatically "I wouldn't want a teacher who would call me a 'dumb Puerto Rican.' That's for sure."

Nicholas still has dreams. He still wants to build houses. He cares for his girlfriend and her young nephew and nieces. He likes cars and music and is interested in current events. Some of the teachers in the middle school Nicholas attended tried to help him. Their help, however, was too little and came too late compared to the harm from the negative experiences Nicholas accumulated in five years.

Nicholas is like many students who have dropped out of Boston schools. He is poor like many others in a school system where 60% of the students come from families receiving public assistance. He is a minority like the majority of students in Boston schools. He has dropped out of school, a decision he made one year ago and a decision made by 43% of Boston students who would otherwise have graduated in 1985.

Some people would say that because of his background Nicholas was a student at risk

when his mother first enrolled him in school. Still it was not inevitable that he would leave school before graduating. Nicholas dropped out because he was fed up with school experiences that convinced him that he did not belong in school. Six years ago, Nicholas entered middle school expecting to graduate from high school. Now he is at the brink of adulthood. Tentatively and without much guidance, he is pursuing alternatives to his education.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS: A FOCUS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION

The symptoms of school disengagement in middle schools are well known. Attendance rates drop in middle schools. Suspension rates rise. School failure becomes more pronounced. The bad news is that in Boston these symptoms of school alienation and disengagement in Boston's middle schools are severe and widespread. The good news is that both the symptoms and the disease are treatable. The number of students (2,640) who dropped out between 1981 and 1985 exceeded by 561 the number of students (2,079) who graduated in the class of 1985. Behind our dropouts are school experiences which made these students vulnerable to early school leaving and which have pushed them to the point where the costs of staying in school outweigh the benefits. Policies and practices in Boston's middle schools are creating the City's dropouts. Indeed, these students are as much the product of Boston Public Schools as are our graduates.

School experiences which push students to the point of dropping out intensify in middle schools. In Boston, an increasing percentage of students are exposed to experiences which make students candidates for early school leaving. For example:

- One out of five middle school students in Boston is absent from school 15% or more of their enrolled time;
- One out of six students is not promoted at least once in middle school;
- One out of ten students is two or more years behind age-appropriate grade;
- One out of ten middle school students is suspended at least once every year in Boston's middle schools.

Behind our dropouts are school experiences which made these students vulnerable to early school leaving and which have pushed them to the point where the costs of staying in school outweigh the benefits. Policies and practices in Boston's middle schools are creating the City's dropouts. Indeed these students are as much the product of Boston Public Schools as are our graduates.

Every one of these students is at risk of dropping out.

The decision a student makes to drop out of school does not materialize overnight. It is a decision that is the end result of a series of school experiences which have undermined students' engagement with their school. Students who are held back in grade, who are truant, and who are frequently suspended are the students most likely to leave school before graduation. By the same token, schools with low promotion rates, poor attendance rates, and high suspension rates are not doing their job in engaging students in their education.

Since Boston's official dropout rate has reached 43%, public attention has focused on the need for dropout prevention. Some proposed solutions envision a system of incentives attractive enough to maintain student interest in school. The promise of partial or full college scholarships or guaranteed jobs upon graduation, a provision of the Boston Compact, for example, are among the rewards suggested for students who meet all school standards and stay in school. These rewards are indeed

important in expanding the range of opportunities available to some of Boston's young people, but they are only a small part of what is needed.

Promises of a job or college education in future years are simply not compelling enough by themselves to persuade students already at risk in middle school to stay five or six additional years in an unrewarding situation until they graduate. From an adult perspective, such rewards may seem worth waiting for. Grown-ups, after all, have the ability to consider the long-range costs of dropping out and the benefits of staying in school and conclude that dropping out is a mistake. A student's perspective is more visceral and, by nature, more

If you are fifteen and have outgrown your assigned desk in seventh grade, if you are suspended and sent home from school for three days when you need attention, if you are bored with your classes, or if you feel that no one adult in your school cares about you, you are more likely to weigh the immediate costs of staying in school against the benefits you imagine will result from your leaving and conclude that you are better off out of school.

oriented to the needs of the present. If you are fifteen and have outgrown your assigned desk in seventh grade, if you are suspended and sent home from school for three days when you need attention, if you are bored with your classes, or if you feel that no one adult in your school cares about you, you are more likely to weigh the immediate costs of staying in school against the benefits you imagine will result from your leaving and conclude that you are better off out of school.

In fact, on some level, you may be right! Two respected researchers have reported that in the short-run at least, self-esteem of students who have dropped out of school is equal to that of college-bound young people. Moreover, they report that non-college-bound students who stay in school are more depressed than their peers who leave (Wehlage, 1986; Fine, 1981, 1986). Such findings challenge educators and policy makers to create positive middle school environments in which the benefits of staying in school, perceived and real, are both immediate and equally accessible to all students. Clearly, intervention designed to address the dropout problem must focus on turning the negative experiences students have in their schools into positive ones so that the perceived benefits of staying outweigh the perceived benefits of leaving.

THE MAKING OF SCHOOL DROPOUTS

School-based policies and practices which put middle school students at risk of dropping out tend to be mutually reinforcing. As Gary Wehlage of the University of Wisconsin has reported, "the process of becoming a drop-out is complex because the act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to the society as school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person" (Wehlage, 1986). When policies and practices communicate explicitly or implicitly that certain students are not welcome in school, students respond by developing a set of negative perceptions and beliefs about themselves and their role in their school. This belief system, buttressed by continuing negative school experiences, further undermines commitment of students to their school.

As the interaction of school policies and practices with students' perceptions about themselves and their role in school intensifies, it creates a momentum toward disengagement. As one negative experience leads to another, they gradually accumulate to undermine students' self-esteem, future aspirations, and engagement in their education. Schools caught up in this momentum toward disengagement will, at best, be ambivalent about the value of their schooling.

Michael's experience illustrates this ambivalence:

Michael is one of thousands of middle school students caught in a complex tangle of mutually reinforcing school experiences and self-expectations. A tall 14 year old with a speech impairment, he has been held back twice in the seventh grade. The first year he was held back because he "didn't do the work." As a result he was "stuck in a class with a bunch of nerds." This experience discouraged him from attending school, and at the end of his second year in seventh grade, he was held back again for attendance reasons. Michael admits to "hooking" at least one day a week when he wakes up late or "doesn't feel like going." When he does attend but arrives late, he is sent to the late room to wait for the end of first period before going to classes. Sometimes he is sent home to get a note of explanation from his mother. When he is sent home, he never returns that day.

Despite his attendance problems, Michael says he would rather be in school than bored at home. He likes learning new things and would like a longer school day to include more time for language arts, his favorite subject. In fact, his language arts teacher is his favorite teacher, a "nice guy," according to Michael, who "knows about everything," "really cares about you," and "really wants you to learn." This teacher sometimes calls Michael at home to find out why he is not in school. At times, he has picked Michael up at home to make sure he gets to school on time.

But Michael is disengaged from other parts of his school experience. Of his seven teachers, he likes his science teacher least because, as he describes her, she is "into discipline," "only cares about the kids that want to do work," and "plays favorites." He has received five three-day suspensions from her "for fighting" when other students made fun of his speech disability, and once when he almost hit his science teacher "when she got me angry." He would not apologize and was suspended for a day.

Michael has been to court for being caught with drugs at school. As a result, he sees a probation officer once a week until the school year ends. He also talks about his personal problems with a teacher who has referred him to RECAP¹ a program for students-at-risk. Michael likes this teacher who is "funny" and, he says, "lets me talk, then gives advice."

Michael knows that some of his teachers and the school principal want him to be promoted so he can graduate. He bluffs, "I rule the school," but he knows he needs the encouragement of his favorite teacher to get through. For the future, Michael would like to go to college and become an artist. For the present, Michael would just like a school with an art class where the teacher does more than "just give you the stuff so you can teach yourself," a school where "everyone is equal and teachers don't 'play favorites'."

1. RECAP, a program for at-risk students, is described in detail in this report's section on "Promising Practices."

Middle school for thousands of Boston students like Michael is like a ride on a merry-go-round. The "ticket" to this ride may be school failure, poor attendance, repeating a grade, or school discipline problems. Once on for whatever reason, students find themselves caught up in a dizzying experience which leaves them bewildered about their place in the school and doubting whether they belong in school at all. Students like Michael are just barely keeping their balance as the merry-go-round of negative experiences moves faster. Take away the goodwill of Michael's principal, the support of the RECAP teacher, or Michael's enthusiasm for art and language arts; add one more demeaning teacher who is "into discipline" or another year in the same grade, and Michael may feel that the costs of staying in school are too high a price for possible rewards that seem too far in the future.

In our interviews with students, we learned that many begin to feel alienated from school when they experience negative messages from the school about their abilities and worth. We talked to students who reported experiences with teachers who put them down, call them "fools" or "punks" and "nag you when you don't catch on." They describe teachers who "yell" and "scream": "What else does he do?"

STUDENTS AT RISK: VIEWS OF SCHOOLS, VIEWS OF THEMSELVES

In spite of these negative experiences, students we talked with are slow to give up on school. Many have also had positive experiences with teachers whose caring and investment in their students make a deep impression. Indeed, students have high expectations for their teachers, and these expectations reflect a desire to learn and to engage in their education. Some students describe their favorite teachers in language nothing short of eloquent. One said her favorite teacher "understands that everyone won't catch on quickly. She helps you learn, takes time, and doesn't go too fast. When you ask something, she gives you an answer right away. She teaches you to try to be the best you can." Another reported his best teachers were "for the students. They want us to go as high as we can and not mess up and take a wrong detour into life." A

That's all he does," said one student we pushed to describe a specific classroom in greater detail. Students are well aware that these teachers do not like them much and feel that these teachers do not really want them to learn. Their least favorite teachers "give worksheets to you, then leave the class for 15 or 20 minutes" and do not provide enough time to finish the work.

As these experiences mount up, students begin to disengage psychologically and experiment with "hooking" school. We talked to students who go to great lengths to hide their truancy from their parents, explaining absences noted on report cards as "computer errors" or erasing school messages left on phone machines before parents arrive home from work. Truancy for most students we interviewed is not much fun, and eventually most return to school sometimes to find, to their surprise, they have not been missed. Students at risk in middle schools often do not progress academically as quickly as their classmates. Forced to repeat a grade, they become more and more alienated from the norms and expectations of their school. For many, non-promotion leads to increased discipline problems and more school failure.

third described a favorite teacher as one who "explains work in the group, then works with you individually." While students appreciate teachers who are "nice," this is not enough. Their favorites also have the ability to "explain the work" and "teach us what we need to know." "Favorite" teachers, above all, have high expectations of their students. One student remembered such a teacher: "She pushed harder. I went from an F to an A. She was like my friend. To help you do the work, she wouldn't just leave you there. If you didn't know the answer, she'd just say, 'Think, think, think.'" Such teachers win their students' deepest respect and loyalty.

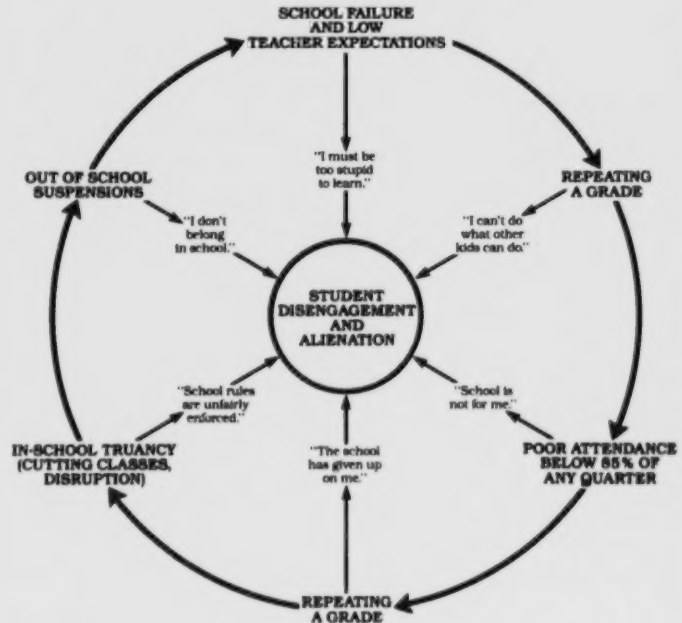
Students we talked with say the one thing they would change about their school is "the fighting." Many have been in fights; many have

been suspended for fighting. But these students are not committed to resolving differences in this way and wish for a school climate characterized more by cooperation than conflict. One student, for example, said he would want to change his school "to keep kids from fighting, make them help each other and learn together." Another wished for a school "where everyone—black, white, Spanish, and Chinese—would go to school and get along."

Individual students have their own particular reasons for leaving school. Some simply go too long without a successful experience of any kind or a teacher who "teaches what students need to know," concluding one day that no one really cares whether they come or not. Others miss so many days because of absence or suspension—what one student called a "three day vacation"—that they cannot catch up with the work. In the meantime, students come to believe that the school perceives them as "troublemakers" despite their efforts to fit in. Slowly, they lose any sense of purpose for continuing with their schooling.

This is not to say that these students do not have dreams or hopes for the future. While a handful do not expect to graduate from high school, the majority plan to "go all the way" through twelfth grade, and a number aspire to go on to college. For the most part, these students expect to manage the demands of high school in spite of problems encountered in the middle grades. Many dream of filling roles modeled by their personal heroes and heroines—sisters, brothers, parents, or public sports figures. The young men hope to play pro-baseball, basketball, hockey, or football; some plan to work in mechanics, construction, carpentry, or trucking; several hope to become artists and one hopes to enter law enforcement at Northeastern University. The young women imagine themselves as nurses and secretaries. One wants to be a policewoman, one an MBTA driver "like my mother" and another an accountant "like my sister." One thinks she will become a receiving clerk. One imagines herself as a teacher. Some of their aspirations reflect a normal passion for sports and a hope for stardom and the limelight. Most of their dreams, however, are regrettably more limited.

THE AT-RISK MERRY-GO-ROUND



For students at risk, one negative school experience leads to another. As these experiences accumulate, they begin to outweigh students' positive experiences. In turn, students' perceptions about themselves and their role in their schools lead them to doubt that they belong in school at all.

HELPING STUDENTS, REFORMING SCHOOLS

Any strategy designed to meet the needs of students at risk must take into account these dreams and hopes. But educators must also find substitutes for the school structures, practices, and policies which feed negative experiences and undermine these dreams. A comprehensive strategy will include intervention on behalf of students at risk who believe school has given up on them. However, it must also focus on reform of school-based practices and policies that push vulnerable students to the point of dropping out. At the middle school level, reforms must be designed to create structures and routines which suit the developmental needs of young adolescents and fit the known characteristics of effective schools.

We report our findings about ways in which current practice undermines student commitment to school because we have listened to effective schools researchers who maintain that "one of the cardinal characteristics of effective schools is that they are as eager to avoid things that don't work as they are committed to implementing things that do"

Within the context of renewed interest in students at risk and recent research about middle schools, this study has set out to describe the role middle schools play in the complicated phenomenon of dropping out. We wanted to understand how school system policies might discourage middle school students from completing their education and, indeed, push students to the brink of dropping out of school. We report our findings about ways in which current practice undermines student commitment to school because we have listened to effective schools researchers who maintain that "one of the cardinal characteristics of effective schools is that they are as eager to avoid things that don't work as they are committed to implementing things that do" (Edmonds, 1979).

Consequently, the first task of this inquiry has been to identify students at risk because of their experiences in Boston middle schools, to count them, to locate them in individual schools, and to talk with some of them in order to determine the extent of the need for immediate remedial and dropout prevention

services. As a result of our review, we know that an increasing number of middle school students repeat a middle grade every year. We know, too, that 1,000 students in middle schools are suspended once every year. On top of that, we know that hundreds of middle grades students are truant from school more than one half of their enrolled time. Indeed, students who are disengaged in middle schools might just as well be called dropouts, even though their names continue to appear on official enrollment records. Because of attendance, suspension, and non-promotion practices in our middle schools, these students are put at risk, and thousands of learning days are lost.

We have also identified schools where symptoms of high non-promotion rates, low attendance rates, and high suspension rates indicate that the school experiences of students in those schools are contributing to student disengagement, alienation, and the belief that "school is not for me." These middle schools are failing. While they do not show high dropout rates for the simple reason that only a few students enrolled are old enough to withdraw formally from school, these schools do not exert the holding power necessary to convince all students that it is worth their while to stay in school.

We know that some schools are well-aware of their own failings. During the course of this project, we also learned of efforts schools are making to engage all students in their education. This report describes some of the "home-grown" programs developed in these schools which hold out the promise of enhancing achievement, attendance, and discipline in all middle schools.

The focus of this report is on students at risk. This focus is not meant to imply a lack of interest in the needs of all students in Boston middle schools. To the contrary, it reflects a conviction that organizational reforms which enhance the engagement of the most vulnerable students are reforms that can benefit all students in the school. In strengthening the holding power of schools for students at risk, middle school education for all students in Boston will improve. In the long run, effective middle schools will also be the most effective form of dropout prevention.

Attendance in Boston Middle Schools: An Illusion of Progress

2

Susan is a quiet, slight 13 year old in seventh grade, the kind of student who could drop out of school without attracting much notice. Susan is occasionally truant from school, sometimes staying home, sometimes going down to the tracks, sitting around the park with friends, or hanging out in the neighborhood housing project. "Hooking is boring," she says, "but so is school."

School is not easy for Susan. She describes herself as a slow learner and feels her teachers do not take the time to help her with work she does not understand. In fact, when Susan does "hook" school, she stays out because she feels the teacher will "fuss" at her for something, picking on her as an example for the rest of the class. She says when she becomes confused, she stops trying to learn.

When Susan "hooks," her absences are noted on her report card. She tells her mother these absences are a "computer error." On Parents' Day her teachers inform her mother of Susan's absences, and Susan is punished. As far as Susan knows, the school has never contacted her home by phone.

Susan is often late for school. In fact she failed a class once because she was late seven times. When she was tardy, the school would send her home to get a note from her mother before allowing her to go to class.

Susan reports she likes school and some of her teachers "a little," but when asked to name the one thing she would enjoy doing more of at school, she says, "Leave it." Susan would like to graduate from high school, "get a real nice job, be rich, and have four children," but she doubts she will be able to do all this. "I'll probably work at Burger King all my life," she says.

On paper, Joe is enrolled in the seventh grade at his middle school. In practice, Joe has not been to school for six months. At 15, he cannot be formally counted as a dropout, but he has virtually withdrawn from school.

Joe does not like to talk specifically about why he does not go to school. He is not worried about his personal safety or possessions. He likes the principal and his math class. Still, Joe has been truant on and off for two years. If the weather is cold, Joe would rather stay home. If the weather is nice, Joe prefers to stay outside. Joe says, "Sometimes the teachers get on [my] nerves," and he reports he has been disciplined for "yelling back" at them. After being warned he will repeat seventh grade because of his absence, he stopped attending in December. He spends most of his time at the basketball court, "hanging" with other young people who are out of school.

Joe reports that when he "hooks," the school "doesn't call [his] house or anything." At one point, however, the school filed a CHINS petition to deal with his truancy. In court, the judge admonished him, telling him, "Just go to school. You're college material. You can pass." This did not persuade Joe, and he reports since the school never called his house after the court appearance, he had no incentive to attend.

Joe knows he will be held back this year because of truancy, for he has already received several warning notices from his school. While this happened last year, Joe managed to get by because he did very well academically, and he felt good when he passed. This year Joe thinks his friends will tease him for being held back, and next year he hopes to participate in RECAP to make up the lost year.

Joe wants to graduate from high school and go on to college. When Joe returned to school after long absences in the past, some teachers told him they were glad to have

him back. His teachers, Joe says, think he can do the work and tell him his achievement is exceptional when he attends. In the meantime, Joe wishes all his teachers would do more than "just give the work out and not teach it." He openly expresses the wish that his school had more pleasant space, better equipment, and more sports. In his ideal school, he would keep some teachers and change others. He wishes he had not stopped attending.

David is a 15 year old in the seventh grade in an alternative middle school. Before enrolling in his present school, he was enrolled for two years in sixth grade at one school, and two years in seventh grade in a second school. Being held back for attendance reasons did not change his relationship with his friends because, he reports, "I didn't have any friends."

David has been truant on and off since he first entered sixth grade, attending only 58 days out of his last middle school year. Out of school, David would "go to the bridge and hang around." When David missed school, the school called his father at work, and David would be punished. His parents also met with a guidance counselor several times to discuss his absences, and a truant officer came to his house "to try to scare me into going to school." David reports he was in "CHINS court" seven times for truancy. At court, he met with a probation officer who he says was "worse than the truant officer. He kept threatening to put me away." When David returned to school after missing a month, he reports, "the guidance counselors and teachers would yell at me."

David says he never went to school because of "the kids." He says, "There wasn't a day went by when there wasn't seven fights at least." David was often the scapegoat in his school and reports, "It wasn't worth going to school because of the beatings." As a victim of many fights, he was fearful of being alone in the hallways or bathrooms and sometimes carried a knife with him. He also felt unprotected when teachers left classrooms unsupervised.

When David did go to school, he admits he "never stayed a full day." At his second middle school he reports one incident when a teacher left the class for a few minutes, telling other students to make sure David did not walk out. David did leave the school, and the students chased him to bring him back to class. David remembers, "They threatened to kill me if I didn't go back to school." He reports many of the students were later suspended for leaving school.

David was finally transferred to his alternative school through the courts. He "loves" this school and describes his teachers as "wicked fair." At his new school he has been suspended one day for "telling a teacher to 'F' off a couple of times." He met with some teachers and his mother and says, "They made me feel ratty for saying it." His ideal school would be "just like" this alternative school.

STUDENTS OUT OF MIDDLE SCHOOL: A MEASURE OF SCHOOLS' HOLDING POWER

Amid claims that attendance has improved in Boston schools, we have bad news to report. Improved attendance rates are, in fact, masking the reality of widespread truancy in middle schools. In Boston's middle schools, increasing numbers of young people are out of school at least one day a week. Rising attendance rates, at best a rough measure of the holding power of our schools, actually hide a much bleaker picture of student attendance in Boston's middle schools than anyone has acknowledged.

School attendance is a major indicator of how well a school is working for its students. If school attendance is high, we assume that students find that school a place which meets their needs for learning and socializing. If school attendance is low, we assume that practices and policies of that school somehow operate to discourage school attendance. When attendance in a particular school or in a school system is low, we would expect to see that school or system review existing policies and practices to determine how changes could encourage better attendance. We would also expect a school or system to identify barriers to school attendance and develop plans to reduce those barriers.

The attendance record of each student in a school gives school staff clues to the possibility that an individual student will leave school before graduating. Poor attendance is correlated with poor academic performance. Both are signals that a student is at risk of dropping out (Weitzman, 1985). When a school system as a whole or an individual school in particular has a commitment to ensuring that all students complete their education, we would expect to see support resources mobilized to promote improved attendance, improve school performance, and prevent dropping out.

Attendance rates tell only part of the story about which and how many students are present in school. School attendance rates tell one thing only: the average percentage of students enrolled who can be expected to be present in a given school any day. Figures on student absence do not count students out of school due to suspension. These students are considered "constructively present," but they



PHOTO: © 1975 WALTER S. SILVER

In Boston's middle schools, increasing numbers of young people are out of school at least one day a week. Rising attendance rates, at best a rough measure of the holding power of our schools, actually hide a much bleaker picture of student attendance in Boston's middle schools than anyone has acknowledged.

account for thousands of days of missed schooling. While days out due to suspension are not counted against a student in determining promotion, they are also not reflected in either school attendance rates or percentages of students' time out of school.

Nor do attendance rates report the severity of absence in any school or systemwide. A school's attendance rate of 88%, for example, does not tell us whether the students who are absent are a different 12% each day who are still attending most of the time or a "hard core" 12% who rarely attend. Consequently, to understand the attendance picture in Boston's middle schools, it is necessary to examine both school attendance rates and statistics describing patterns of absence for students in each school.

In our review of School Department statistics we have learned the following:

1. Systemwide, attendance rates have improved for all middle schools over three years.

While the median school attendance rate in 1982-83 was 81.5, this rate rose to 85.1 in 1983-84 and again to 88.2 in 1984-85. More-

over, rates improved for all racial groups in middle schools systemwide.

Table 1 summarizes this improvement.

	BLACK	WHITE	OTHER	ALL
1982-83	80.8	75.3	84.8	81.5
1983-84	86.8	80.4	85.1	85.1
1984-85	89.9	85.4	89.5	88.2

Clearly, while attendance rates for all students have improved, the change has been most dramatic for white students. Whites, however, still attend at a rate lower than the median rate for middle school students in all schools.

2. Attendance rates show wide variations from school to school and by race.

While the range between high and low rates has narrowed considerably for overall attendance, rates broken down by race still show extreme differences both between schools with high rates and schools with low rates and within schools (Table 2).

	BLACK		WHITE		OTHER		ALL	
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
1982-83	94.7	73.0	88.5	64.9	97.5	75.9	87.0	73.0
	Lewis	Rsvlt	Whitly	Wilson	Barnes	Timlty	Whitly	Rsvlt
1983-84	95.2	81.6	89.5	51.0	91.7	71.6	88.2	79.7
	Timlty	Mackey	Edison	Timlty	Rsvlt	Timlty	Holms	Mackey
1984-85	95.4	83.0	95.8	62.5	96.0	59.8	91.8	80.2
	Irving	Mackey	Edison	Mackey	Barnes	Shaw	Edwrd	Mackey

*Schools where racial groups represent less than 5% of the school's population have been eliminated from the analysis.

School-based practices in each school appear to make some difference in motivating middle school students to attend school. In response to the *Student Promotion Policy's* requirement that students attend 85% of the days in each quarter as a condition for promotion to the next grade, many schools which now show high attendance rates have introduced a variety of measures to monitor student absence and reward good attendance. Responsibility for monitoring varies from school to school. In some schools, homeroom teachers are responsible; in others one teacher takes responsibility for each grade. In other schools, the assistant principal or an attendance committee tracks absent students. Many schools report that they telephone parents routinely when students are absent. In addition to tracking students, many schools also recognize good attendance with attendance certificates and "extras" such as coupons for Burger King or baseball tickets.

3. White students in five middle schools continue to have attendance rates significantly below overall rates for these schools.

While all middle schools by 1984-85 had raised their overall attendance rates to 80% or better, and while the median school attendance rate for white students systemwide had reached 85.4%, attendance for white students at five schools—the Lewenberg, Wilson, Dearborn, Michelangelo, and Mackey—lagged behind the 80% low overall rate for all schools (Table 3).

In three of these schools—the Lewenberg, Wilson, and Dearborn—attendance rates for white students did improve from 76.9, 64.9, and 71.7, respectively, in 1982-83. This improvement, however, did not keep pace with the improvement for each school as a whole. Moreover, in the Michelangelo and Mackey Schools, attendance rates for white students actually dropped during that three year period from 1982-83 rates of 75.2 and 71.0, respectively.

While many students in Boston middle schools have improved their attendance in three years, school practices to improve student attendance seem to have worked less well for whites than for other students. Moreover, while in many schools white attendance is equal to that of other students, this is not the case in these schools. Low attendance for whites has been a persistent problem. In 1983, researchers from Boston University's School of Medicine found that 44% of middle school students with problems attending school during the school year 1982-83 were white. They also found that frequent absence was highly correlated with the school attended (Weitzman, 1985). Findings related to racial patterns of non-attendance highlight the need for multi-

dimensional strategies to reduce the number of school dropouts in Boston. No one explanation for dropping out will take into account the needs of every group. White students appear to be the students most at risk for attendance reasons.

Table 3: Schools with Attendance Rate for White Students Below 80% (1984-85)

	WHITE	ALL
Lewenberg	79.4	88.2
Wilson	72.7	86.0
Dearborn	74.5	88.1
Michelangelo	74.7	91.5
Mackey	62.5	80.2

4. Hispanic students in at least three schools have not kept up with improvements in overall attendance rates.

While schoolwide attendance rates at the Shaw Middle, Wilson, and Gavin Schools rose steadily from 1982 to 1985, rates for "Other" students in those schools remained below 80%, the lowest overall rate reported by any school. "Other" students at the Shaw Middle are 89% Hispanic; at the Wilson, 97% Hispanic; at the Gavin, 98% Hispanic (Table 4).

Schoolwide and systemwide attendance rates mask differences among all racial and ethnic groups. In the same way, rates for "Other" students mask differences in attendance rates for Hispanic and Asian students. At the Shaw Middle, Wilson, and Gavin Schools, the vast majority of this category are Hispanic. At the Wilson, where Hispanic students numbered between 22 and 34 students each year, attendance rates dropped from 1982 to 1985. At the Shaw Middle, where Hispanic students totaled between 16 and 24, Hispanic attendance rates decreased over the three year period. At the Gavin, where from 52 to 68 Hispanics were enrolled, the attendance rate for Hispanic students increased by only .4 compared to 11.1 points for the school overall.

While the rising attendance "tide" does carry all boats in some schools, this is not the pattern in all schools where some students are

apparently left behind. Clearly, while some efforts to motivate students make a difference for many students, they do not work with all students. However, each school has the obligation to apply its resources in ways that work with equal effectiveness for different groups. For example, calls to students' parents may work for English-speaking parents, but unless school staff are bilingual and bicultural, such calls are not likely to enlist the help of parents who do not speak English. At schools like the Edwards where Hispanic students are not enrolled in bilingual programs, full-time Spanish-speaking staff may simply not exist. The School Department is obligated to provide schools with adequate and appropriate resources to reach out to all students' families in ways that are effective and culturally compatible with families' lifestyles.

Table 4: Schools* with Attendance Rates for "Other" Students Below 80% (1984-85)

	OTHER	ALL
Shaw (89% Hispanic)	59.8	86.4
Wilson (97% Hispanic)	78.7	86.0
Gavin (98% Hispanic)	77.2	86.1

*Schools where "Other" students represent 5% or less of the population have been eliminated.

Because of the limitations of school attendance rates in describing the extent to which students are at risk because of absence, the Massachusetts Advocacy Center obtained additional attendance data based on attendance reports received from individual schools in the Department's Central Office. These data calculated the percentage of days each student was absent based on the number of days each student was enrolled in school. This information was obtained for school years 1984-85 and 1985-86. To be counted absent, a student had to have attended school at least once during the year.

5. Approximately one out of five middle school students was absent more than 15% of the time enrolled during each of the last two years. Moreover, about 5% of all middle school students were absent more than half the time they were enrolled for these years, based on a four term average.

These latter students, totaling about 500 each year, have virtually dropped out of school although they have not officially withdrawn. However, they are not counted in the official school dropout rate. Approximately one out of six students is out of school; the equivalent of one day per week or more (Table 5).

Thousands of students are at risk in Boston's middle schools because of attendance. Each student absent without reason for more than 15% of each quarter as a matter of official

Moreover, because we requested data for each term, we have accounted for students who might enroll at mid-year. By the same token, students who transfer in mid-year are counted for subsequent terms in their new schools, and students who withdraw are counted only to the date of withdrawal. For all these students, the percentage of time absent is calculated only on the basis of students' time enrolled. Finally, data are calculated by race which identifies Hispanic and Asian absence rather than "Other."

The following additional findings are based on these data:

policy will not be promoted. Non-promotion, in turn, increases the chances of students' dropping out by 40-50%. Approximately 22% of all middle schools students are at risk for attendance reasons each year because they are absent more than 15% of their time enrolled. Of that 22%, approximately 6% may miss this standard by only several days and should be easily retrieved by their schools. However, approximately 16% show more serious patterns of absence and are out of school more than 20% or more of their time enrolled.

Truancy is an educational problem which should trigger the provision of more rather than less attention to the needs of these students. Instead, non-promotion is a response which penalizes students academically without addressing the potential reasons for truancy. It is a response which is likely to contribute both to increased absence and school failure.

Table 5: Time Absent from Boston Middle Schools, 1984-85, 1985-86

	0-15%	16-20%	21-50%	51%
1984-85	77.7	6.2	11.2	4.8
(Four-Term Average)				
1985-86	77.3	6.5	11.4	4.7
(Four-Term Average)				

6. The percentage of students absent 15% or more of their time enrolled increased in 14 out of 22 middle schools between 1984-85 and 1985-86.

While the median percentage systemwide for students absent more than 15% of their time enrolled was 20.9% in 1984-85, this median rose to 21.5% in 1985-86 (Table 6).

Of the 14 schools where more students were absent 15% or more of their time enrolled, eight showed an increase of more than two percent, with four—the Roosevelt, Shaw, Rogers, and Edwards Schools—showing an

increase of five points or more in the percentage of students in this category.

What remains consistent is the school-based nature of attendance patterns. A student attending the Lewenberg School, for example, has better than eight out of ten chances of meeting Boston's attendance standard for promotion. In contrast, the chances that a student at the Shaw Middle School will meet the same standard are approximately six out of ten.

7. In 8 out of 22 middle schools, the percentage of students absent more than 20% of their time enrolled increased by two or more percentage points from 1984-85 to 1985-86.

Of all middle schools, the median percentage of students out more than one fifth of the time enrolled was 15.2% in 1984-85 and 15.4% in 1985-86. Unlike students who may miss meeting attendance standards by only a few days these students show patterns of chronic absence and are at serious risk. By 1985-86, in every single middle school, at least 10% or more of all students were out of school 20% or more of their time enrolled (Table 7).

Two years is not enough time to indicate the extent to which numbers of students slipping

into this category constitute a trend. However, if schools' holding power were improving, we would expect to see a decline in this category for all students. Slippage is a problem for all these schools. However, where schools have lost an additional percentage of students greater than 5% in this category, as has happened at the Edwards and Shaw Schools, school officials should take an immediate accounting in those schools to determine what factors might be contributing to increased truancy.

Table 6: Percentage of Students Absent 15% or More of Their Time Enrolled (Four-Term Average)

	1984-85	1985-86
Edison*	18.4	20.8
Taft*	24.3	27.3
Curley	20.9	20.4
Lewis	20.7	21.0
Roosevelt*	20.1	25.3
Irving	21.9	21.5
Lewenberg	13.5	13.5
Shaw*	26.9	37.6
Rogers*	15.2	20.3
Thompson	21.6	20.5
Cleveland	27.2	23.2
Holmes*	17.3	22.2
Wilson	31.9	28.5
Dearborn	27.1	21.9
Gavin	30.1	30.6
McCormack	29.4	25.2
Edwards*	12.1	17.9
Timilty	20.8	22.3
Barnes*	19.1	24.6
King	23.6	21.1
Mackey	24.9	20.3
Wheatley	17.3	18.7
Median	20.9	21.5

*Shows increase from 1984-85 of two or more percentage points.

Table 7: Percentage of Students Absent More Than 20% of Their Time Enrolled (Four-term Average)

	1984-85	1985-86
Edison*	13.2	15.3
Taft*	17.5	19.5
Curley	15.1	13.8
Lewis	13.6	14.8
Roosevelt	15.3	17.1
Irving	16.0	15.4
Lewenberg	9.4	9.7
Shaw*	18.6	28.5
Rogers*	10.6	13.6
Thompson	14.4	14.1
Cleveland	21.4	16.6
Holmes*	11.8	14.4
Wilson	24.6	21.9
Dearborn	21.3	16.5
Gavin*	20.0	22.7
McCormack	22.3	17.8
Edwards*	7.3	12.9
Timilty	14.8	15.8
Barnes*	13.1	17.1
King	17.6	15.4
Mackey	18.8	15.3
Wheatley	10.8	12.7
Median	15.2	15.4

*Shows increase from 1984-85 of two or more percentage points.

These percentages suggest that our middle schools have diminishing ability to hold onto and engage young adolescent students. For the past two years, approximately 15% of all middle school students have been out of school the equivalent of one day a week of their time enrolled. These students numbered approximately 1,585 in 1984-85 and 1,526 in 1985-86.

While staff in many schools complain that courts do not back them up when they initiate

court action, in fact, of the nearly 1600 students at serious risk in 1984-85, only 344 were the subject of CHINS petitions. In our judgment, use of the CHINS process confirms the views of many that the judiciary is an inappropriate forum to deal with student attendance matters. While these students need extra attention, Court action is not likely to result in additional services for these young people.

8. The percentage of students absent 20% or more of their time enrolled increases between the first and fourth school year quarters.

In 1984-85, 84.8% of the students enrolled during the first quarter attended 85% of their time enrolled while 10.7% were out of school 20% or more. By the fourth quarter, only 75.1% were attending 85% or more of their time enrolled, while 19.2% were out of school 20% or more of that time.

During the 1985-86 school year, 81.9% of students in middle schools attended 85% or more of their time enrolled during the first quarter with only 75.0% attending at that rate during the final quarter. Moreover, while at the beginning of the year 11.5% of all students were

absent 20% or more, the percentage of students in this high risk category rose to 17.6% by the fourth quarter (Table 8).

If school practices were actually working to prevent school absence and improve attendance, we would expect the percentage of students absent 15% of their time enrolled to decrease during the year. In fact, as the school year progresses, the number of students absent more than 20% of that time nearly doubles between the beginning and end of the school year. Middle school students may begin the year with high levels of motivation. However, the holding power of school diminishes during the year, and students "vote with their feet" in increasing numbers to a point where one out of four students is absent more than 15% of the time enrolled by the last quarter.

We worry that the increase in absences during the year may reflect students' perceptions that the school has written them off following early-year absences. Many truant students we talked with noted that their schools had made little effort to find them when they were absent and had only minimally acknowledged their return, even after prolonged absence. Scarce resources in our schools can tempt school staff into feeling they are doing the best they can with students who do attend and cannot be bothered with the problems of students who do not. In the long-run, this attitude can result in the loss of thousands of students.

Table 8: Time Absent in All Middle Schools for Each Quarter

	0-15%	16-20%	21-50%	51%
1984-85				
1st Term	84.8	4.5	7.5	3.2
2nd Term	74.9	6.8	13.8	4.5
3rd Term	77.8	6.1	11.1	5.0
4th Term	73.3	7.5	12.6	6.6
1985-86				
1st Term	81.9	6.6	8.2	3.3
2nd Term	75.6	6.1	13.8	4.4
3rd Term	76.5	6.2	12.8	4.5
4th Term	75.0	7.2	11.1	6.7

9. In two years, only one middle school—the Lewenberg—ended the school year with fewer students seriously absent than when the year began.

As the year progressed, all other schools lost students, as more and more students stayed out more than 20% of the time. In fact, the percentage of students lost to chronic absence over the course of the year actually doubled in nine schools in 1984–85. Moreover, in ten schools in 1984–85, by the fourth quarter, one out of five students was attending school less than 80% of the time. In 1985–86, in all but six schools, first quarter attendance was worse than first quarter attendance the previous year (Table 9).

In these schools, efforts to reach out to Hispanic students who are out of school should be tailored to the unique needs of these students and their families, accounting for parents who may not speak or read English and who may be unfamiliar with the school culture of North America. Because of the severity of truancy for Hispanic students in these schools, the School Department should ensure that a bilingual, bicultural staff person is available every day in each school to track students at the first absence, whether in person or by telephone.

On a school by school basis, students apparently lose their motivation to attend school during the course of the year. Something seems to happen from September to June that undermines students' initial commitment and perception that it is worth their while to come to school. Moreover, data from 1985–86 suggest that more students become discouraged about their school experience earlier in the year.

We believe that at least part of the reason for increasing truancy lies in the *Student Promotion Policy* itself. In spite of school efforts to encourage and reward student attendance, vulnerable students who miss more than 15% of any quarter know that they will not be promoted for the year. It should not come as a surprise, then, that once students have exceeded the allowed number of absences, the one remaining incentive to attend school—promotion to the next grade—is removed. As the year goes on, an increasing number of students, reaching 25% of all middle school students by the fourth quarter, slip into more severe absence patterns.

Researchers have long tried to untangle the relationship between school failure and poor attendance, never certain which is a cause and which an effect. Since 1983, Boston's *Student Promotion Policy* has, in effect, institutionalized a causal relationship which undermines possibilities for student progress. As a matter of official policy, poor attendance automatically triggers non-promotion with its message of school failure.

Table 9: Percentage of Students Absent More Than 20% of Their Time for the First and Last Quarters of the School Year

	1984–85		1985–86	
	1st Term	4th Term	1st Term	4th Term
Edison	10.4	13.3	8.6	12.9
Taft	10.2	23.3	10.8	20.9
Curley	8.4	18.4	8.7	14.5
Lewis	9.7	16.6	12.5	20.6
Roosevelt	8.9	17.3	13.6	19.9
Irving	8.3	18.5	13.1	14.7
Lewenberg	6.4	11.0	11.0	9.1
Shaw	9.5	23.8	21.4	25.4
Rogers	5.0	14.1	10.9	12.7
Thompson	7.4	20.8	9.4	16.7
Cleveland	17.4	22.5	12.3	17.5
Holmes	9.5	14.3	10.0	17.4
Wilson	16.4	27.3	16.9	25.9
Dearborn	15.7	26.7	12.7	18.0
Gavin	12.5	25.6	18.2	26.1
McCormack	14.4	27.3	14.3	22.5
Edwards	5.4	8.8	6.1	12.1
Michelangelo	12.8	13.8	—	—
Timilty	11.9	17.0	11.4	19.6
Barnes	9.0	14.2	9.3	19.2
Cheverus	9.0	14.5	—	—
King	10.4	24.4	12.7	17.9
Mackey	13.1	21.7	11.8	18.3
Wheatley	4.7	16.1	6.9	13.7
Median	9.6	17.9	11.6	18.0

Moreover, just as this feature of Boston's *Student Promotion Policy* exacerbates attendance problems for students, it also undermines educators in their attempts to engage chronic truants. A school may go to great lengths to motivate students to return to school, but technically the grounds for promoting students who make progress in attendance are narrow. Moreover, most schools have many more students eligible for available services than they can provide.

10. Out of all the time available for education in 1984-85 and 1985-86, 12% of that learning time—totaling 226,190 days in 1984-85 and 209,638 days in 1985-86—was lost systemwide in Boston's middle schools due to school absences.

Moreover, from school to school, the percentage of learning time lost varied considerably, ranging from 8.9% in the Lewenberg School to 17.4% in the Shaw Middle School. Systemwide, this percentage is highest for white students, followed by Hispanic students (Table 10).

Calculation of the percentage of learning time lost by race is also useful in clarifying the extent to which Hispanic students are at risk for attendance reasons in specific schools. These data reveal differences masked by attendance rates which collapse Hispanic and Asian rates into an "Other" category. In six schools with Hispanic enrollments 5% or more in

Strict enforcement of a quarterly attendance standard has been in place for three years. This policy has not only failed to engage one out of five Boston middle school students in their education but has contributed to progressively severe attendance problems for these students. More options for services and greater flexibility to account for improvement are essential to reverse the slide into truancy.

1984-85, and in nine such schools in 1985-86, the percentage of learning time lost for Hispanic students was above the systemwide percentage. In 1984-85, these schools were the Edison (13.9), Taft (16.7), Irving (16.2), Shaw Middle (15.9), Gavin (17.6), and Michelangelo (20.3). In 1985-86, these schools included the Edison (15.8), Taft (15.4), Shaw Middle (13.9), Wilson (18.2), Dearborn (16.6), Gavin (19.1), Edwards (17.7), and King (13.7). In these schools, efforts to reach out to Hispanic students who are out of school should be tailored to the unique needs of these students and their families, accounting for parents who may not speak or read English and who may be unfamiliar with the school culture of North America. Because of the severity of truancy for Hispanic students in these schools, the School Department should ensure that a bilingual, bicultural staff person is available every day in each school to track students at the first absence, whether in person or by telephone.

The loss of learning time in Boston's middle schools does not belong to individual students alone although it will profoundly affect their future. It is also a loss for schools themselves and for a city that needs all the resources and talents of its young people.

Table 10: Percentage of Learning Time Lost in Middle Schools Systemwide

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN	TOTAL
1984-85	12.2	14.7	13.3	3.2	12.3
1985-86	11.9	14.2	13.1	4.2	12.0

Strict enforcement of a quarterly attendance standard has been in place for three years. This policy has not only failed to engage one out of every five Boston middle school students in their education but has contributed to progressively severe attendance problems for these students.

OUT OF SCHOOL? STUDENTS SAY WHY

Many educators, court officers, and mental health professionals who have speculated about the reasons for school absence typically locate causes of truancy in students' personalities or social circumstances. In fact, for some students, family problems such as a parent's depression or addiction may discourage them from attending school. For others, chronic health problems or emotional difficulties of their own keep them at home. Still others have conflicting obligations to their families requiring them to care for younger siblings or translate for non-English speaking family members at clinics or social security offices.

It is our judgment, however, that most students stay out of school when something about the school is threatening to them and when the perceived costs of attending are greater than the rewards. Students we interviewed for this project want to learn. Indeed, they speak with warmth about the teachers and schools that have helped them learn. However, too often their positive learning experiences are few compared to their negative experiences. Many truant students have been held back in grade at least once and feel embarrassed about being too old for their grade. Others have been suspended at least once. Many learn at a slower pace or differently from other students and feel frustrated when teachers "just throw a paper at you and don't explain it to you." Out of frustration, these

students stay out of school, preferring in effect to feel like a "criminal" rather than a "dummy."

When asked why they "hook," many students simply say, "I don't like school" or "It's too boring" or "I fall asleep most of the time." Others are more specific: "Mainly because of science," said one. "There are too many kids in my class," said another. "Teachers don't take the time to help you," said a third who, like Susan, may stay out to avoid being "picked on" and embarrassed when she has not understood the work. Students report they sometimes miss the bus, then decide not to attend that day. Others say they decide while walking to school, "Man, I just don't feel like going."

A number of students expressed anxiety about what they perceive as racial prejudice at their school. In some cases, students described school climates in which racial tension is reflected in name-calling which escalates into fighting. While these same students have often been involved in the fighting, they do not relish it. Some are suspended, then decide not to return. Others leave school in mid-day, slipping out the door between classes or, in one school, going up to the roof and jumping onto the building next door. In these cases, students are deciding consciously to stay out of schools that at worst have communicated to them they are not wanted and at best have failed to engage them in learning.

SCHOOL-BASED EXCLUSION PRACTICES

In the course of this study, we also learned that certain school-based practices work to give some vulnerable students a not-so-gentle push out the school door. For example, it is the policy in some middle schools not to admit tardy students without written explanation from a parent, a practice which constitutes school exclusion. If a student does not have the good fortune of finding a parent at home, that child is likely to stay out of school for that day at least. Most students we interviewed who found themselves in this situation admitted that once sent away, they did not return to school. Moreover, community workers report that some students who are turned away may find themselves in an unfamiliar neighborhood without money or lunch. The chance

that this situation might be repeated can undermine students' motivation to attend on subsequent days when they risk tardiness.

In addition, several students we interviewed reported having been suspended for cutting classes or leaving the school building without permission. While these are allowable grounds for suspension under Boston's *Code of Discipline*, in practice such suspensions are not likely to discourage class-cutting. For students at risk, "rejection policies" such as these communicate the message that students' schools do not value their presence, further weakening students' engagement in their education.

SCHOOLS' PRACTICES, STUDENTS' RESPONSES

Boston's middle schools employ a variety of responses to students out of school. According to students we interviewed, school responses range from notation of unexcused school absences on students' report cards to the involvement of school attendance officers and juvenile court personnel. Judged by our interviews, the more personal responses from the school elicited the greatest success in persuading students to return to school. Where immediate, personal, consistent, and persistent responses were lacking, students remained unconvinced that attending school was worth their effort.

According to Boston's *Attendance Procedure*, schools must notify parents of a student's absence "no later than the third failure to attend school and on a regular basis thereafter." After five unexplained absences, schools are to notify the Supervisor of Attendance who contacts students' parents. After seven unexplained absences, the Supervisor of Attendance investigates the absences to determine whether court action is necessary. Finally, the Supervisor of Attendance "should make application for court action or explain in writing the reasons court action should not be sought."

Few students reported having fun as truants. Most are doing "nothing, really." While they spend some time with others out of school, many also report simply staying home, sleeping, watching television, and "walking around." For these students, time out of school is not daring, challenging, or fun, but it is safer and less threatening than a school experience that seems equally boring and presents frustrations greater than these students can handle alone.

Students we interviewed reported they had experienced school responses to their truancy ranging from "nothing" to court action. Almost all the students we interviewed reported that "someone" from the school had called their parents. One student reported the school would call only when all his friends were "hooking" too. Sometimes a teacher called, sometimes a guidance counselor, nurse, principal, or assistant principal. Often these calls resulted in parents' punishing students at home and meeting with school staff at the school. In some cases these tactics worked, especially for students who reported they "hooked" only to "follow the crowd" when their friends were also truant. In general, students we talked with were not convinced the school had a real stake in their education or their well-being even when the school's response escalated. Court involvement had little effect with students we interviewed except in several cases where students received specific services and placement in an alternative school as a result.

Indeed, some students specifically reported that school staff had not followed through on promises they had made, leaving them feeling that their school cared little about their return. One student who attends school three days a week on average reported her principal had promised her mother he would call any day she did not attend, and she felt betrayed when he did not call on a day she was legitimately home sick. Another reported an attendance officer had made an appointment for a home visit but had never appeared. Several reported arriving back in school after staying out a month or more only to find teachers treating them as if they had been there all along. Moreover, many are aware that having missed more than seven days in the marking period, they will not be promoted. Such reactions can hardly persuade students they have been missed, let alone that the school has a place for them. Students' suspicions that "school is not for me" are likely to increase following such experiences.

Schools which accommodate early adolescent needs for social interaction, exploration of new experiences, and self-esteem in their curriculum, teaching approach, and organization

could, in our view, convince many of these students that the benefits of attending school outweigh the benefits of truancy. Our interviews with middle school students convinced us that students "hook" to meet developmental needs that are not being met in schools. Most students reported they spend time out of school "hanging out with friends" —on the streets, on the basketball court, or "down by the tracks." One "hooks" because she likes "to be around boys;" another hangs around an alternative school her sister attends; others go to friend's houses. These students acknowledge they are meeting needs for social interaction and admit, as one did, that they "go back to school when [their] friends won't hook anymore."

Some students talk of exploring the city, visiting Faneuil Hall or Nieman-Marcus. One student spends time at her local Burger King, helping to clean up without pay. When students choose these activities, they may be choosing them because opportunities for learning about the larger world and for experimenting with adult roles are not available in school. Few students, however, reported having fun as truants. Most are doing "nothing, really." While they spend some time with others out of school, many also report simply

staying home, sleeping, watching television, and "walking around." For these students, time out of school is not daring, challenging, or fun, but it is safer and less threatening than a school experience that seems equally boring and presents frustrations greater than these students can handle alone.



PHOTO: JOAN ALBERT

SCHOOL TRUANCY: THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

Over the last several years, the problem of truancy in Boston's middle schools has been hidden by rising attendance rates. At the same time, community organizations have become increasingly aware of students out of school in the City's neighborhoods. Several youth-serving groups have responded with creative programs designed to steer students back into school.

In South Boston, the West Broadway Youth Center has launched a "Best Year in School Ever" program for students from the Gavin, McCormack, and Dearborn Schools. Thirty students have signed up for the program, committing themselves to meet the terms of an individually designed contract for each school quarter. Students and parents sign the contract which includes both personal attendance and academic goals. Then every morning, Youth Center staff call the schools to check

student attendance. If students are not in school, staff will call or visit students' homes immediately. The Center also serves as a "homework center," providing tutoring between 7:00 and 9:00 P.M. six evenings each week. In this way, the Center is a community link between the school and family, programmatically extending the school program into the community. Moreover, Cindy Laba, Director of Youth Services for the West Broadway Multi-Service Center, thinks that as a result of this approach both students and schools will begin to feel that the community cares whether truant students are in school. Already the Center's staff report high participation and reinforcement by parents of their efforts. While students meeting the terms of this contract will be visiting places such as New York City or Disney World, everyone agrees that the most important reward is likely to be improved school engagement.

At the same time, the Boston Community Schools Program has initiated an effort in Charlestown, Dorchester, and Roxbury to bring out-of-school middle school students back into school. Started at the Charlestown Community Schools Program, "Back to School" serves students ages 13, 14, and 15 who have left the public schools. Funded by grants from the Boston Housing Authority, the Boston Foundation, and the Church Home Society, in addition to the Boston Community Schools Program itself, the Program also has the support of the Department of Social Services which funds a position for a Youth Outreach Counselor.

The basis of the Program which enrolls up to 35 students at each site is an Individualized Learning Contract. According to the terms of the contract, students attend classes 20 hours a week and may also receive individual tutoring. In addition to academic instruction, students participate in a group activity which focuses on life-coping skills, multi-cultural awareness, career choices, and drug or alcohol education. Students also keep a journal and receive one-half hour of individual counseling each week. Job placement in local non-profit organizations of ten hours each week is also available.

As of the fall of 1986, 27 of the 35 students enrolled at the Charlestown site have re-entered school. Five others will be returning to "Back to School." Moreover, as students reenter public schools, they will continue to receive support services which, Director Michael Griffin believes, are crucial to students' staying in school.

Both "The Best School Year Ever" and "Back to School" provide examples of the willingness of community organizations to work with the schools to motivate students to attend school.

CONCLUSION

One out of five Boston middle school students does not attend school 85% of the time enrolled. This figure does not include days lost due to suspension. Poor attendance is strongly associated with poor academic performance. Both are strong predictors of dropping out. Current school policies and practices, including Boston's *Student Promotion Policy*, are

Both depend on immediate, persistent, and personal contact with students and their families to mobilize support for individualized goals. Both model a willingness to make extraordinary efforts to reach students in their home neighborhoods at whatever hours are necessary to show students that the entire community as well as their parents care about their education and their future.

Other community organizations have expressed willingness to do whatever is necessary to improve individual attendance. At a community forum sponsored by the Truancy Committee of the Bayside Council for Children in September 1986, representatives of community organizations offered their services to the schools in District C. One staff person specifically reported she was willing to have schools call her agency when students were absent and parents could not be reached, with agency staff acting as parent "surrogates" in these cases.

While many community groups stand ready to assist schools, they also ask schools to review policies and practices which may contribute to truancy. The Bayside Council for Children's Truancy Committee, for example, has recommended that students' parents be contacted the day of the first absence or by 7:00 the following morning rather than after the third absence as current policy prescribes. The Committee has also recommended that tardy students be admitted on arrival at school and their parents called immediately. It should go without saying that all contact with parents should be in the language of the home, an issue of crucial importance at the schools where poor attendance of Hispanic students results in significantly above-average days lost to learning for these students.

putting students at risk. Our findings show that these policies need to be the focus for change. In addition, school conditions that make learning difficult for students and contribute to truancy must be the target for reform. Until such changes are made, Boston's dropout rate is likely to remain high.

Non-Promotion: Adding Insult to Injury

3

Linda will turn 16 this year, her second year in eighth grade and her fifth year in the middle school she attends. Although she received warning notices in every subject, Linda says she did not expect to be retained and claims that no one told her she would not be promoted "until the day I was held back." Linda says, "My friends? They all got kept back too."

Linda does not feel she has many opportunities at school to explore topics that interest her, and she does not think anything she studies is interesting or useful. Of her six teachers, Linda's favorite teaches language arts: "I learn something in his class," she says. Linda says he is different from most teachers who "just give out work and tell you to do it. They don't explain it to you."

Linda is especially good at drawing but does not get to do that anymore because her art class was replaced by a computer class. She reports, "I didn't really care that art was cancelled, because I couldn't be creative there anyway. I had to do what the assignment was."

Linda is being held back for attendance reasons. She attends school three times a week, once "hooking" for over a month. When she returned to school, she says, "They were shocked to see me. I didn't want to go back at all, but none of my friends would hook with me any longer, and I didn't want to myself." She does not attend "because I don't like school. It's boring. I'd rather sleep." Linda has never talked to anyone from school about why she was not in school, although after a long period of absence, an attendance officer called her parents to tell them the date she would have to appear in court. Linda has since been to court twice where "they keep threatening me that they are going to put me away. They never say where. It kind of scares me, but I don't believe them." After her experience in court, Linda attended school for about three weeks, then started "hooking" again "when nothing happened."

Linda plans to graduate from high school but rules out college "because five years is good enough." She would like to be a nurse, but expects to be "an accountant like my sister."

Rafael is 15 and reports he has been held back twice in the sixth grade at his middle school. Last year, at mid-term, his school principal told him he was being promoted to seventh grade, but since nothing changed in Rafael's school program, he was never sure what grade he was in. The only thing that changed, according to Rafael, was that when he was "bad," the principal would threaten to put him back in sixth grade.

Rafael's advocate suspects he has special needs and, with his parents' permission, requested a 766 evaluation for Rafael in October 1985. This evaluation has never taken place. Nor, according to Rafael, has the school ever offered him counseling, tutoring, or RECAP services. Rafael, however, was placed in a class for "bad kids" which had its own special rules but no special services.

Rafael says he attends school every day. He enjoys woodworking, and he especially likes his art teacher. Rafael speaks warmly of her, particularly because he feels she did him a favor by responding to a letter he wrote requesting her to speak to his class in an effort to get them to behave.

Rafael says, "I think I'll give high school a miss." He is not sure what he will do in the future but is thinking of trying out construction work "like my brother."

BOSTON'S STUDENT PROMOTION POLICY: A CASE OF FALSE ADVERTISING

Holding students back is a Boston Public Schools practice which annually puts thousands of Boston students at risk of later dropping out. In middle schools alone, 1,786 students were not promoted in 1984-85; 1,714 in 1983-84; 1,568 in 1982-83. If these students repeat a grade once in their school years, their chances of dropping out increase by 40-50%. If they are held back a second time, their chances of leaving before graduation increase by 90% (Mann, 1986).

The news that holding students back causes more harm than good may come as a surprise to those who view non-promotion as the way to respond to students who do not meet attendance and academic standards. School officials and business leaders who have shaped Boston's *Student Promotion Policy* have built the threat of non-promotion into attendance and academic standards as a way of motivating students whose performance falls below acceptable levels. According to their theory, students with a history of truancy or poor academic performance, when faced with the threat of non-promotion, will respond with improved attendance or will try harder to master classroom assignments. Some parents and educators have also supported non-promotion, believing that another year to review grade material will ensure improved learning.

Billed as a panacea for an ailing school system, the treatment, in fact, is both expensive and has severe side effects that become part of the illness. In the meantime, practices that contribute to school failure go unaddressed. Non-promotion itself, at a cost of \$3900 for each student repeating a grade, may constitute the only "remediation" for thousands of middle school students.

Boston's *Student Promotion Policy* was developed during the tenure of Superintendent Robert Spillane and approved by the Boston School Committee in 1983. As a prerequisite for promotion, students must attend 85% of the days in each quarter. Students must also receive passing grades in coursework and pass curriculum-referenced tests in every subject. In addition, starting in 1985-86, students in fifth, eighth, and twelfth grades must pass a Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test as a "gate" from the elementary, middle, and high school grades.

As an abstract set of standards, the *Student Promotion Policy* establishes an explicit level of expectations for student performance. In designing these standards, Superintendent Spillane reflected the frustration of many parents, community leaders, and business representatives in Boston that Boston graduates were not adequately prepared for the world of work or higher education. One purpose of these standards was thus to "restore meaning" to the Boston diploma.

Another stated purpose of this policy was to "act as a catalyst for bringing services to students who are at risk." The *Policy* claimed that student failure to meet standards would trigger services which would be provided during the repeated year in grade "in different classroom settings using alternative instructional methods and materials in smaller class size." Finally, the authors of the *Policy* portrayed this document as the means of upgrading education in Boston in general. They painted a glowing picture of renewed vigor in the school system, promising that "in the long run, higher standards, increased attention to students' needs, and improved instruction will result in fewer and fewer students being retained at each grade level, and more and more students graduating from Boston schools with the skills and knowledge they need to lead successful, productive adult lives" (p. 2).

Unfortunately, in Boston's middle schools these claims have been more wishful thinking than reality. In fact, more and more students are being retained at grade level every year. With every grade retention, the chances of these students' graduating decreases. In the meantime, promised remedial services and smaller classes have not materialized to meet the need.

NON-PROMOTION IN BOSTON'S MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Non-promotion itself, at a cost of \$3900 for each student repeating a grade, may constitute the only "remediation" for thousands of middle school students. In fact, at this rate, non-promotion of middle school students cost Boston Public Schools nearly seven million dollars in 1984-85 alone. Billed as a panacea for an ailing school system, the treatment, in fact, is both expensive and has severe side effects that become part of the illness. In the meantime, practices that contribute to school failure go unaddressed.

In the course of reviewing non-promotion statistics for three school years, the Massachusetts Advocacy Center has learned the following:

1. At the middle school level, the percentage of non-promoted students has increased steadily for three years.

In 1984-85, 1,786 Boston middle school students were not promoted, up from 1,714 in 1983-84 and from 1,568 in 1982-83. During the 1982-83 school year, the percentage of middle school students held back was 13.5, more than one out of seven students. By 1984-85 this percentage had jumped to 16.8, affecting approximately one out of every six students. In the interim year, this percentage



PHOTO: SOMERVILLE MEDIA ACTION PROJECT

totaled 15.1. The increase in middle school non-promotion is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Non-Promotion for Boston Middle Schools

	ENROLLMENT	NON-PROMOTEEES	% NOT PROMOTED
1982-83	11,624	1,568	13.5
1983-84	11,350	1,714	15.1
1984-85	10,644	1,786	16.8

2. While all racial groups have experienced an increase in non-promotion, the percentage of Hispanic students not promoted has increased at twice the rate for all Boston middle schools students.

While the increase of change for non-promotions over three years was 24.4% for all middle school students, the increase for Hispanic students during that period was 49.5%. Data also shows a 19.2% increase for black students, 21.3% increase for white students, and a 225% increase for Asian students whose numbers, however, remain small (Table 2).

This jump in the percentage of Hispanic students not promoted should be especially alarming when Hispanic students in Boston already represent a disproportionate percentage of students who drop out. According to

Boston's analysis of school dropouts in the graduating class of 1985, Hispanic students represent 17.9% of the students who leave school before graduating compared to 13.7% of all high school students enrolled (Camayd-Freixas, 1986).

Table 2: Percentage of Non-Promoted Middle School Students by Race

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN	ALL
1982-83	15.6	13.6	10.7	2.4	13.5
1983-84	17.5	14.1	12.9	5.8	15.1
1984-85	18.6	16.5	16.7	7.8	16.8

3. Black middle school students are disproportionately retained in grade.

Table 3: Percentages of Non-Promotions for Middle School Students by Race

	BLACK*	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN
1982-83				
% Enrolled	49.6	28.7	16.2	5.1
% Not Promoted	57.1	29.0	12.8	.9
1983-84				
% Enrolled	50.1	25.6	17.4	6.3
% Not Promoted	58.2	23.9	14.9	2.4
1984-85				
% Enrolled	49.8	24.1	18.1	7.4
% Not Promoted	55.1	23.6	17.3	3.4

*Chi Square = 83.1 in 1982-83; 72.0 in 1983-84; 49.0 in 1984-85, significant at the .001 level in each year.

In each year for three years, blacks consistently represent a greater percentage of all non-promoted students than their representation in the middle school population (Table 3).

These findings indicate that the burden of non-promotion falls most heavily on black students and has done so for three years, both prior to and since the implementation of the *Student Promotion Policy*. Such findings indicate that our schools have not learned to teach black children and have not heeded the findings of effective schools research which describes schools which successfully teach black students. Disproportionate non-promotion rates also suggest an underlying racism in school climates which inhibits black students progress.

4. Percentages of students not promoted in middle schools vary dramatically from school to school.

For example, in 1984-85, while the percentage of all middle school students not promoted was 16.8, this percentage ranged from a low of

3.6 in the Taft to a high of 34.1 for students at the King. In that same year, similar ranges existed within ethnic groups. For black students, the percentage not promoted ranged from a low of 3.7 at the Taft to a high of 33.6 at the King; for white students, 2.6 at the Lewis to 42.7 at the King; for Hispanics, 4.9 at the Taft to 42.9 at the Cheverus (Table 4).

This pattern of differences strongly suggests that some students who are held back in one school might be promoted in another. It also suggests that school-based factors such as school climate, leadership, or teacher quality play a part in promotion outcomes. Clearly, similar students are at greater risk in some schools than in others.

Table 4: Range of Percentages of Middle Students Not Promoted by Race

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC*	ASIAN*	ALL
1982-83	2.5-25.8	0.8-34.0	2.5-25.8	0.0- 6.7	1.2-24.0
(Median)	(13.9)	(12.1)	(10.1)	(0.0)	(13.2)
1983-84	3.4-29.6	0.0-32.6	1.5-24.3	0.0-11.9	4.2-27.7
(Median)	(16.2)	(13.5)	(14.4)	(0.0)	(14.7)
1984-85	3.7-33.6	2.6-42.7	4.9-42.9	0.0-14.6	3.6-34.1
(Median)	(16.4)	(15.2)	(15.3)	(0.0)	(15.7)

*Schools where Hispanic and Asian students represented less than 5% of enrollment were excluded.

5. By 1984-85, five middle schools—the Cheverus, Dearborn, King, Michelangelo, and Wilson—were each holding back more than one out of every five students in their respective schools. These schools collectively accounted for almost 30% (29.8) of all non-promotions, although their enrollment accounted for only 17.6% of the middle school population.

Of the five schools, the percentage of students not promoted at the Wilson climbed steadily from 24.0 in 1982-83, to 27.7 in 1983-84, to 28.2 in 1984-85. At the Dearborn, this percentage was 23.4 in 1982-83, 23.0 the following year, and 26.6 in 1984-85. During those

three years at the King, percentages of students held back were 23.0 in 1982-83 and 18.1 in 1983-84. By 1984-85, more than one out of every three students at the King repeated a grade when the percentage of students held back at that school reached 34.1.

6. Within some individual middle schools, the percentage of students held back varies dramatically by race.

Non-promotion data for many schools show wide disparities between the group experiencing highest chances for promotion and that group experiencing lowest chances of promotion. Such differences call into question the ability of the individual school to provide equal educational opportunity to all students.

When high schoolwide percentages of students not promoted are coupled with wide discrepancies between groups, the school can be considered seriously troubled. In such a school, students are experiencing low chances for success within a climate that suggests inequity, a situation that is likely to contribute to students' disengaging from school. School Department figures indicate that some middle schools are both failing to teach all students successfully and also show differences in percentages of students not promoted greater than 15 percentage points between racial or ethnic groups.

In 1982-83, three schools showed severe differences between high and low percentages of students not promoted within the school. At the Lewis, 34.0% of the white students were not promoted compared to 13.8% of the black students. At the Roosevelt, 30.2% of the white students were held back compared to 11.8% of Hispanic students. At the Edwards, 30.2% of the white students were held back while not one of the 175 Asian students was required to repeat a grade.

In 1983-84, one school, holding back approximately one out of five of all students, also showed a discrepancy of greater than 15 percentage points between groups. At the Mackey, 27.2% of the blacks were not promoted compared to 8.3% of the Hispanics.

In 1984-85, two schools—the Edwards and Wheatley—reported percentages for black students not promoted of 30.0 and 21.7 respectively, both 15 percentage points or more above non-promotion percentages for Asian students in those schools. The Michelangelo reported that 39% of Hispanic students were held back compared to 7.4% of the white students.

Table 5 presents schools with both high overall percentages of students not promoted and wide discrepancies between group rates.

A wide discrepancy between high and low percentages within a school is a symptom of a school climate that is not meeting the needs of all students. Either a high overall percentage of students not promoted or a wide disparity between group percentages within a school should cause alarm. The simultaneous occurrence of both conditions should trigger immediate intervention to repair school functioning and to protect students enrolled in that school.

Table 5: Schools with High Percentages of Students Not Promoted and High Discrepancy Between High and Low Groups Rates*

	% NOT PROMOTED	% DIFFERENCE
1982-83		
Lewis	19.3	20.2
Roosevelt	18.3	18.4
Edwards	17.4	30.2
1983-84		
Mackey	20.6	18.9
1984-85		
Edwards	18.3	19.5
Michelangelo	21.6	31.8
Wheatley	16.0	21.7
Cheverus	25.2	17.4

*Groups with 5% or less enrollment in each school have been eliminated.

7. Certain middle schools show non-promotion by race that are grossly out of proportion to their numbers in the school population.

We agree with educator Ron Edmonds (1984) that as a basic measure of school effectiveness, both overall academic mastery and the extent to which equal proportions of the school population demonstrate minimum mastery must be considered. Like disparities in percentages calculated for racial groups, disproportionate percentages suggest a school climate in which all students do not benefit equally from available resources, attention, and expectations.

In 1982-83, four Boston middle schools with high overall percentages of non-promotion reported disproportionate percentages for certain racial/ethnic groups. Both the Lewis and Roosevelt showed disproportionate percentages for whites. Whites made up 21.1% of the enrollment at the Lewis but 37.2% of the students not promoted. White enrollment represented 17.0% of the population at the Roosevelt, but whites made up 28.1% of the students not promoted. At the Rogers, blacks made up 65.2% of the enrollment but 79.0% of the students retained in grade. At the Edwards, both black and white students were at higher-than-expected risk of non-promotion, a situation made possible because of a high enrollment of Asian children few of whom are retained in grade. That year the Edwards reported that blacks made up 40.9% of students not promoted, compared to their 28.8% enrollment, and whites made up 33.0% of students not promoted compared to their 18.9% enrollment.

Fair treatment for all students is crucial in engaging students. In fact, research indicates that student perception of racial prejudice and discrimination is the second most important factor differentiating dropouts from non-dropouts among black students.

In 1983-84, disproportionate non-promotion was reported at the Edwards, Dearborn, and Mackey Schools. At the Edwards that year, Hispanic students, with an enrollment of 20.4%, made up 31.7% of the students held back. At the Dearborn, white students made up 34.9% of students not promoted but only 24.6% of the population. At the Mackey, black students made up 68.8% of students not promoted but only 55.1% of the school population.

In 1984-85, three Boston middle schools—the Edwards, Michelangelo, and the Wheatley—reported alarmingly disproportionate non-promotions, with black students over-represented in the students not promoted at the Edwards and Wheatley and Hispanic students overrepresented at the Michelangelo. Thus, while 28.4% of all students at the Edwards were black, 46.4% of students not promoted were black. That year at the Wheatley 54.5% of all students were black while 78.0% of students not promoted were black. At the Michelangelo, Hispanics were also disproportionately non-promoted: while Hispanic enrollment was 20.4%, Hispanics made up 37.0% of students held back in grade.

Table 6 lists middle schools with both overall percentages of students not promoted 15% or greater and disproportionate non-promotion where the percentage of students not promoted by race exceeds the percentage of students enrolled in the school by 10%.

Fair treatment for all students is crucial in engaging students. In fact, research indicates that student perception of racial prejudice and discrimination is the second most important factor differentiating dropouts from non-dropouts among black students (Felice, 1984). To the extent that disproportionate non-promotion suggests discriminatory practices, disproportionate percentages may reflect conditions which alienate students from their learning.

In addition, several other schools with middle-range non-promotion rates show a pattern of disproportionate non-promotions by race and are in need of immediate intervention. In addition to the Edwards, schools which show three years of disproportionate non-promotions include the Irving and the Wheatley, where black students make up a greater proportion of students repeating a grade than would be expected based on their enrollment in those schools. At the Irving, where 13.6% of the students are not promoted, black students make up 47.3%, 44.6%, and 41.6% of the enrollment for three years from 1982 to 1985, but 69.5%, 61.6% and 62.3% of the students retained in grade. The Wheatley presents a similar pattern. At that magnet middle school, black enrollment totaled 52.5% in 1982-83, 55.1% in 1983-84, and 57.5% in 1984-85. However, during those years black students make up 71.4%, 90.3%, and 78.0% of non-promoted students. Data from the Irving and Wheatley is dramatic because patterns persist over three years.

8. Middle school students in Boston are at greatest risk of non-promotion in seventh grade.

While percentages of students retained in grade for sixth and eighth graders are lower than the overall percentage for all middle school students, 21.0%, one out of five, of all seventh graders were not promoted in 1984-85. Moreover, this pattern has persisted since 1982-83. This percentage also varies from school to school with the percentage of seventh graders held back reaching a high of 48.6 in the King in 1984-85.

Percentages of students held back by grade are summarized in Table 7.

Table 6: Schools with High Percentages of Students Not Promoted and High Disproportions by Race

OVER-REPRESENTED GROUP			
	% Enrolled	% Not Promoted	Group
1982-83			
Lewis	21.1	37.2	Whites
Roosevelt	17.0	28.1	Whites
Rogers	65.2	79.0	Blacks
Edwards	28.8	40.9	Blacks
Edwards	18.9	33.0	Whites
1983-84			
Dearborn	24.6	34.9	Whites
Edwards	20.4	31.7	Hispanics
Mackey	55.1	68.8	Blacks
1984-85			
Edwards	28.4	46.4	Blacks
Michelangelo	20.4	37.0	Hispanics
Wheatley	54.5	78.0	Blacks

Table 7: Average Percentage of Students Not Promoted

	6th GRADE	7th GRADE	8th GRADE	ALL
1982-83	13.8	16.6	9.9	13.5
1983-84	14.5	19.4	11.4	15.1
1984-85	15.8	21.0	13.6	16.8

Given the high rate of non-promotion in seventh grade, and given the finding that up to 40% of students repeating a grade score lower on standardized tests the second time around, it should not be surprising that average Metropolitan Area Test scores for Boston's seventh graders drop from the sixth grade average. Thus, while test scores have improved over three years, seventh grade scores for each year are never better than sixth grade scores.

Tables 8a and 8b present standardized test scores by grade.

Table 8a: Average Middle Schools MAT Reading Scores*

	6th GRADE	7th GRADE	8th GRADE
1982-83	44	42	48
1983-84	48	48	54
1984-85	50	48	54

Table 8b: Average Middle Schools MAT Math Scores*

	6th GRADE	7th GRADE	8th GRADE
1982-83	44	42	42
1983-84	54	52	54
1984-85	62	56	58

Ironically, lower test scores provoke not a call for remediation, but a call for holding back even greater numbers of students. This "solution" is misguided at best, creating the illusion of helping while, in fact, actually undermining educational progress. Data gathered for this report raise the possibility that holding students back, far from being the solution to low test scores might, in fact, be a factor contributing to low student achievement.

*Scores include results from all 6th, 7th, and 8th grades including Boston Latin School, Boston Latin Academy, Umana School, and the Tobin School, which may raise systemwide averages. (Test scores are expressed as a percentile of all students taking these tests nationally.)

9. In 1984-85, 1,137 middle school students in Boston were two years or more behind their age-appropriate grade.

One of the consequences of holding students back in any grade is that by the middle grades, large numbers of students are older than average for their grade. In Boston, at the end of the 1984-85 school year, 716 students in sixth grade were age 14 or older; 297 in seventh grade were 15 or older; and 152 in eighth grade were 16 or older. As a group, these students represent 10.7% of the overall middle school population and are at severe risk of dropping out. At greatest risk are Hispanic students: 13.3% of Hispanic students are two or more years behind their age-appropriate grade. This percentage is greater than that of either black or white students (Table 9). Since

Hispanics, unlike Asian students, are also held back at high rates, their over-age for grade status coupled with lower achievement indicates this group is especially vulnerable.

It appears that the intent of the Boston *Student Promotion Policy*, stipulating that students will not be retained in the same grade more than once, is being circumvented. While the policy itself further acknowledges that "experience has shown that double retentions can lead to serious problems" (p. 5), clearly many students have been held back in grade twice. The School Department has at least made provisions for students who have been in eighth grade for two years to be promoted (Memorandum of Joseph M. McDonough, Deputy Superintendent to Community Superintendents, Headmasters, and Principals of Middle Schools, May 28, 1986). However, no such policy has been designed to account for seventh graders although in 1984-85 nearly 300 students were age 15 or older and in seventh grade.

Table 9: Middle School Students Enrolled Two Years or More Below Age-Appropriate Grade in 1984-85

BLACK		WHITE		HISPANIC		ASIAN		TOTAL	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
539	10.2	232	9.0	257	13.3	132	16.8	1,137	10.7

10. 37.2% of all middle school students sixteen years or older dropped out of school in one year.

During 1984-85, 109 of the 333 middle school students age 16 or older dropped out of school. Of these 109 middle school dropouts, 33.0% were black, 38.5% were white, and 28.4% were "Other," indicating that white and "Other," mostly Hispanic, students are overrepresented in this population. Moreover, the rate for sixth graders was 12.5, for seventh graders 39.7, and for eighth graders 33.2.

Clearly, holding older students back in middle schools is a practice which creates school dropouts. These students, educationally among our system's neediest, are not even counted in official Boston dropout figures which begin with students at ninth grade and above. They need immediate attention in the form of services, not another year in middle school.

REPEATING A GRADE: WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

In Boston schools, some students are not promoted on the assumption that another year in grade will improve school performance. Some have received failing grades in their course-work; others have not achieved passing grades on the systemwide Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test that, in middle schools, determines graduation from eighth grade. In Boston, the *Student Promotion Policy* dictates that these students should repeat their grade to improve school achievement. Research indicates otherwise. Not one writer of the six major literature reviews conducted in the past 12 years adopts a position favoring a policy of non-promotion for students not meeting standards. Summary reports of these reviews provide a flavor of their conclusions:

One general conclusion about the effects of grade retention relative to grade promotion is clearly warranted by the results taken as a whole: There is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment problems (Jackson, 1975).

If, as is often the purported case today, retention of pupils is accomplished with the intention of improving the academic achievement in the basic skills of these pupils, the research does not seem to support this practice. It seems that retained pupils fall behind during the year that they are retained and spend the rest of their academic careers in vain attempt to catch up (Holmes, 1983).

The conclusion from these studies should give pause to anyone who strongly advocates a policy of raised promotion standards: there is no solid evidence to show that merit promotion is any more effective than social promotion in spurring student achievement (Labaree, 1983).

In Boston schools, some students are not promoted on the assumption that another year in grade will improve school performance... Research indicates otherwise. Not one writer of the six major literature reviews conducted in the past 12 years adopts a position favoring a policy of non-promotion for students not meeting standards.

Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweigh positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of non-promotion, the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show that there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many other plans have failed (Holmes & Matthews, 1984).

The results of this study were not surprising; that is, they served to support the great majority of studies in other parts of the country over the past 80 years and showed that retaining students did not serve the intended purpose of increasing the student's (sic) growth academically or in personal or social adjustment (Niklasen, 1984).

The bulk of the literature on elementary school grade retention suggests that the possibility of noxious consequences is far more likely with retention than promotion. Until definitive research exists to support retention, it seems inadvisable to retain children at all (Walker, 1984).

These findings clearly challenge the notion that retention in grade is a practice which will improve students' academic performance.

Other research findings suggest not only that the current *Student Promotion Policy* is ineffective, but that it actually puts students at risk of impaired achievement. Some of these are cited as follows:

- Repeating a grade actually undermines the achievement of many students. In a South Carolina study of 6,000 students, up to 40% of the students held back showed less learning and scored lower on standardized achievement tests after repeating the grade than in the previous year. Only 20% to 35% of non-promoted students learned more during their second year in the same grade (Rose, 1983).
- Once students are held back, the achievement gap between them and other students never closes. While "social promotion" is not an attractive alternative to holding students back, low-achieving students who are promoted do learn more than equally low-achieving students who repeat a grade. According to one study in Austin, Texas, reading achievement increased by 1.1 of a grade equivalent for slow learners who had been promoted compared to a .8 grade equivalent for matched students who repeated a grade. In math, the difference was even greater, with promoted students showing an average gain of 1.1 grade equivalent compared to a .6 grade equivalent gain for similar students held back (Schuyler and Matter, 1983).
- Any benefits of holding students back drop drastically after first grade. In one study, 80% of first graders but less than half of the students in grades two and three met satisfactory achievement standards after repeating a grade (Reinherz and Griffin, 1970).
- Students held back in grade are at high risk of dropping out of school. Data in Boston indicates that students who drop out are more than three times more likely to have been held back in grade than promoted during the year preceding their withdrawal from school (Camayd-Freixas, 1986).
- *Youth in Transition*, a long-term study of school drop-outs, found that repeating one grade increases the risk of dropping out later by 40-50%; repeating two grades increases that risk by 90% (Mann, 1986). A report prepared for the Austin, Texas School District indicates that by age 14, being older than average for grade is a strong predictor of dropping out (Doss, 1983).

Clearly, even children who repeat one or two elementary grades are at risk of dropping out by the time they reach the middle grades. The simple decision to extend a student's required time in school tips the scale toward early school leaving, making it much less likely that these students will ever graduate.

SCHOOL PRACTICES AND ACADEMIC FAILURE

In this report we will not pretend to unravel the complex web of factors that contribute to low academic achievement leading to non-promotion. We can guess that a variety of cause-and-effect relationships involving educational, family, cultural, and social conditions feed into under-realized academic performance. Certainly, by the time students reach middle school, the differences they bring from their individual personal backgrounds are exaggerated by their schools' response to these differences. Once we acknowledge this complexity of factors, however, we must also sort out the school practices that compound these differences and constitute school-based barriers to student success.

In our survey of community organizations, some workers suggested that many students who were failing might have undetected and unidentified special needs requiring special services. In fact, according to Chapter 766 regulation 315.0, students who are failing at mid-term and students who fail to be promoted must be considered for a special education evaluation by the school principal. As of September 1986, principals are required to inform parents of non-promoted students that these students have been considered for a special evaluation and that they have the right to an evaluation upon the parents' request. In the course of our work at the Center, we have talked with few parents who realize they have this right.

However, probably the most pernicious school practice contributing to school failure is tracking or ability grouping. This is a practice that begins long before middle school, but its effects are apparent daily in the middle grades. Many students we talked to referred to their placement in the "class for nerds" or the "class for bad kids" as an experience that had alienated them from their middle school, but the experience of being labeled inferior was not a new one for them.

In Boston's elementary grades, children in the earliest years are often grouped according to perceived ability for reading and math. This grouping severely limits opportunities for success for some children right from the start, beginning in the first few weeks of first grade or even kindergarten. Research shows that ability grouping determines the content of what teachers teach and what students learn, the amount of class time devoted to student-engaged learning, and the quality of instruction students receive. Once tracked, students are rarely regrouped. Thus, as the year goes on, students in the "lower" group fall behind students in the "high" groups, making it impossible for students in the former to catch up with students in the latter. John Goodlad, in his authoritative book *A Place Called School* (1984), reports that even in the span of one year, children in the least advanced group may have learned at a rate five times slower than students in the most advanced group. By the fourth grade, reports Goodlad, students in the "high" and "low" groups can show test scores measuring differences of four entire grades! Goodlad also emphasizes that students in "low" groups gradually become isolated within a school and experience diminished access to more satisfactory conditions for learning.

When students experience ability grouping over several years, the chances of their escaping without damage to their academic progress, self-esteem, and future aspirations are slim. In *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, the most comprehensive summary of research on tracking to date, Jeannie Oakes reports a total lack of evidence in support for educational or social benefits of tracking. By the time students reach adolescence, tracking actually seems to result in



PHOTO: LOG SCHOOL

Many students we talked to referred to their placement in the "class for nerds" or the "class for bad kids" as an experience that had alienated them from their middle school, but the experience of being labeled inferior was not a new one for them.

lower self-esteem and undermines students' aspirations for their future. Low-track students participate less in extra-curricular activities and tend to misbehave or act out in their classrooms. Consequently, students tracked into a "slow" ability group experience higher suspension rates and subsequent labeling that contributes to their alienation from school and leads to dropping out.

"Our major job is unlabeled these kids. Their major problem is self-esteem, and that's always being whittled away by the people whose business is supposed to be building it up."

Community youth workers in Boston who work with some of the students who are most alienated from school have first-hand knowledge of the impact of the labeling process on vulnerable students. In our survey of youth workers, we heard descriptions of students with little confidence who were frustrated with their inability to learn in school, students who had been "pegged as troublemakers," and students who "feel that they are academically inferior and/or too old, so they never even try high school."

Joe Carpineto, Director of Dorchester's Log School, an alternative school for middle school students, is even more explicit. He says, "Our major job is unlabeled these kids. Their major problem is self-esteem, and that's always being whittled away by the people whose business is supposed to be building it up." Log School teachers are well-aware that students are not inclined to commit themselves to an institution that consciously undermines their self-image. As Joe Carpineto says, "Unless we create some bonding, we're not going to go anywhere." Tracking and ability grouping are practices which discourage the attachment of vulnerable students to their school.

By the middle grades, school sorting practices have shaped the self-concept of many students. For example, in an unpublished study completed for a graduate course in education, teachers in Burlington, Vermont studied self-esteem in their seventh grade students. They learned that by the time students were 12 years old, they understood their rank in the

school's hierarchy of expectations and agreed with the appropriateness of their placement in a slower class (Stevenson, 1986). It is only a short step from this acceptance of their place at the margins of school life to a deeper perception that "school is not for me" and the decision to drop out.

On top of tracking, then, non-promotion adds insult to injury. Even on the face of it, the placing of older, low-achieving students with younger classmates or with "repeaters" is not likely to increase students' motivation or engagement with school, especially if teachers assigned to work with these students are the least experienced. The irony is that in accordance with Boston's current promotion standards, non-promotion is both the inevitable outcome of school failure and a justification for further labeling.

Tracking is not inevitable in our schools. In fact, since research shows that tracking harms slower students and has no measurable benefit for brighter students, each school needs to experiment with alternatives to ability grouping. John Goodlad, for one, reports on the success of the mastery learning approach in which students learn cooperatively with more able students helping slower students in heterogeneous small groups. According to an article in the *Harvard Education Letter* of September 1986, cooperative learning teams give low achievers the chance to feel successful while students who learn more quickly can deepen their understanding of an idea by explaining it to others. The harms of tracking are too great not to try such approaches in Boston's middle schools as a way to improve student achievement.

TEACHER EXPECTATIONS: THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Closely related to tracking is a more subtle phenomenon of low teacher and staff expectations which place invisible barriers between students' expected performance and their potential achievement levels. To some extent these barriers are evident in staff comments about their work with students. Thus, one teacher might ask out of real concern for her students, "What can you expect from a student whose home life is so difficult?" Perhaps a better question to pose might be "What can we expect from educators who cannot imagine ways they might help students transcend the difficulties of personal backgrounds?"

Subtle barriers to success may be evident in simple classroom interactions between students and teachers. For example, teachers often praise higher achieving students for academic performance while praising slower students for good conduct. Teachers also tend to call on higher achievers more than students they think are less able and allow more time for higher achievers to answer questions. In

contrast, teachers tend to ask slower students the easiest questions, and provide fewer clues to slower students while waiting for their response. Moreover, teachers spend less time listening to low achievers and give low-achievers less praise and more criticism, even when their answers are correct (Moran, 1981).

Findings about the small ways in which teachers may slight students who learn differently are based on many hours of observational research. We have not done similar observations in Boston's middle schools. However, it seems reasonable to believe that Boston's classroom interactions, on the whole, will not differ much from patterns observed elsewhere. Subtle behaviors which convey low expectations are often not intentional, but low expectations for Boston school children can become unconsciously institutionalized in ways as small as the awarding of baseball tickets rather than books for good performance.

CONCLUSION

Boston's *Student Promotion Policy* has now been imposed on top of existing school-based practices that impair student achievement. Its implementation does not require schools to review or reform these practices. Rather it narrows the mainstream that is already failing to serve all students well, threatening to leave many students high and dry on the banks.

Currently, in Boston middle schools 17% of all students are held back compared to a range of 4% to 8% for all grades nationally. In spite of overwhelming evidence against any educational benefits of retaining students in grade and in spite of additional evidence suggesting that non-promotion actually undermines the likelihood those students will finish high school, Boston Public Schools hold thousands of students back in grade every year. Each one of these students is at risk of dropping out and in the short run needs immediate individualized attention. However, if, in the long run, the Boston School Department is serious about

If, in the long run, the Boston School Department is serious about reducing the current 43% dropout rate, the Department must eliminate the policy of non-promotion. To pursue a policy of non-promotion is to pursue with full consciousness a policy that puts students at risk and undermines their ability to achieve.

reducing the current 43% dropout rate, the Department must eliminate the policy of non-promotion. To pursue a policy of non-promotion is to pursue with full consciousness a policy that puts students at risk and undermines their ability to achieve.



PHOTO: ELLEN SHUB

Retention in grade does nothing to enhance students' achievement while increasing the likelihood that these students will drop out. Large numbers of students in Boston middle schools are at risk because of non-promotion. Each one of these students now behind appropriate age for grade deserves immediate attention. Indeed, according to the School Department's own *Student Promotion Policy*, they are entitled to remedial services.

In the long run, however, dropout prevention and retrieval efforts for individual students make little sense if school policies and practices themselves continue to put vulnerable students at risk. Short-term interventions are not likely to reverse the increase in non-promotions in middle schools. Nor is it likely that enough alternative programs can be created to meet the needs of every middle school student experiencing school failure and non-promotion. The numbers of students not achieving are simply too great to convince us that more programs added on to traditional approaches can significantly reverse the dropout trend.

Middle School Suspensions: From Pushouts to Dropouts

4

It is a brilliant morning in November. Charles sits alone in the sun on the wide stone steps of his middle school. Charles is in sixth grade, and he has been suspended from school for three days.

Charles is, indeed, a student who has been disruptive in school. He is not allowed to ride the school bus because he "bothers" others, so every day he takes two MBTA buses from his Roxbury neighborhood to his assigned school in Jamaica Plain. His behavior has triggered a school referral for special education, and he has recently been placed in a special education resource room which he himself describes as the "class for crazy kids."

Today Charles is out of school because, by his own admission, he went back to his old sixth grade class and was "cutting up." He says, "I ran around the room, and the teacher couldn't catch me. Then she caught me and sent me to the office." At the office, school staff called Charles' mother who works at an office downtown and told her Charles was being suspended. Charles' mother agreed that he should be sent home, and Charles is not sure whether she will be able to come back to school with him for a school conference, the condition set by the school for readmission before the three-day suspension is up.

Charles likes to read, especially about reptiles and weather. "Reading's my best subject," he reports proudly. He does not want to go home because he feels unsafe by himself in his house. So at 11:00, a social worker who lives in the neighborhood passes by and after talking with Charles, takes him to the local library, helps him find some books about reptiles and weather, and leaves him with a sandwich for lunch.

"GET OUT"—THE TWO-WORD REJECTION POLICY

The use of suspension in Boston's middle schools is putting hundreds of Boston middle school students at risk of dropping out every year. In spite of a well-established connection between school suspension and dropping out, and in spite of findings of Boston's own Commission on Safe Public Schools whose recommendations emphasized developing alternatives to suspension, the percentage of middle school students suspended from school actually increased between 1982 and 1985. By 1984-85, nearly one out of every ten middle school students could expect to be suspended from school at least once during the school year. This experience increases the risk of dropping out for every one of these students.

Because each suspension averages three days, Boston middle school students can lose up to 5000 days of learning every 180-day school year because of official school suspensions. Additional days are lost due to unofficial and unrecorded suspensions. While suspended students are not counted as absent, the time they are losing from their education is no less

While suspended students are not counted as absent, the time they are losing from their education is no less real than the time lost because of illness. This time lost from learning, combined with each student's experience of suspension as a rejection that both excludes them and labels them as "troublemakers," results in a weakened commitment of students at risk to school.

real than the time lost because of illness. This time lost from learning, combined with each student's experience of suspension as a rejection that both excludes them and labels them as "troublemakers," results in a weakened commitment of students at risk to school.

The number of suspensions for every 100 students in Boston's middle schools is 14 times greater than the number in elementary schools according to the 1983 report of Boston's Commission on Safe Public Schools.

Why? Do the same students who have succeeded in following school rules through fifth grade suddenly become so unruly in sixth grade that they must be excluded from school? In fact, students *are* changing, gaining independence and maturity as they enter adolescence. Inevitably as they come to terms with their changing bodies, intellectual abilities, and perceptions of themselves, their peers, and their world, they are negotiating

THE STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

In analyzing suspension data for Boston's middle schools, we wanted to learn separate but related pieces of information. First, we wanted to establish the numbers of students who are suspended at least once every year, both systemwide and in each school. The suspension experience increases the risk of dropping out for each one of these students. Student suspension rates for each school indicate the risk of suspension encountered by students enrolled in that school.

Second, we wanted to discover the frequency of suspension and the extent to which Boston's middle schools are using suspension. Thus, school suspension rates, the number of suspensions recorded for every 100 students enrolled in middle schools, indicate the extent

new relationships and roles within the schools and with the adults who are responsible for their learning. It is the very fact that students are changing that requires schools to make changes as well. The dramatic rise in suspensions in the middle grades reflects the institutional failure of Boston's middle schools to adapt their daily routines, practices, and organizational structures to normal developmental needs of young adolescent students.

to which schools use suspension, both systemwide and in each school, as a response to student misbehavior.

Third, we wanted to learn whether the burden of the use of suspension continues to fall most heavily on minority students, especially blacks, as has been reported in Boston high schools in the past and is reported nationally. Consequently, in addition to determining both student suspension rates and school suspension rates by race, we looked at these rates compared to enrollment rates by race.

A review of Boston Public School statistics on middle school suspension reveals the following findings:

1. Over 1,000 students are suspended at least once every year from Boston middle schools. Since 1982-83, the student suspension rate in middle schools has increased slightly.

In 1984-85, 1,022 middle school students were suspended from school, up slightly from 1,012 in 1983-84 and the same as reported in 1982-83.

However, while the number of students suspended has remained stable, a decline in enrollment means that the rate of students suspended at least once a year was higher in 1984-85 than in the previous years. Thus, in school years 1982-83 and 1983-84, the student suspension rate in middle schools was 8.8

and 8.9, respectively. In 1984-85, this rate increased to 9.6 (Table 1). Approximately one out of every ten students enrolled in middle schools is now suspended at least once each year.

Table 1: Boston Middle School Students Suspended at Least Once

	ENROLLMENT	* SUSPENDED	SUSPENSION RATE
1982-83	11,624	1,022	8.8
1983-84	11,350	1,012	8.9
1984-85	10,644	1,022	9.6

2. Boston middle schools suspend black students at rates consistently higher than the student suspension rate for middle schools systemwide.

In the past three years, the percentage of black students suspended has consistently ranged between 11% and 12%, compared to the 8.8 to 9.6 range for all middle school students. Moreover, black students are suspended about twice as often as white students. In school years 1983-84 and 1984-85, rates for Hispanic students were also reported as higher than the rate for all middle school students systemwide (Table 2).

Table 2: Boston Middle School Students Suspended by Race

	ENROLLMENT	* SUSPENDED	SUSPENSION RATE
1982-83			
Black	5,762	670	11.6
White	3,335	195	5.8
Hispanic	1,886	144	7.6
Asian	588	11	1.9
Total*	11,624	1,022	8.8
1983-84			
Black	5,691	634	11.1
White	2,907	179	6.2
Hispanic	1,980	194	9.8
Asian	713	4	.6
Total*	11,350	1,012	8.9
1984-85			
Black	5,298	638	12.0
White	2,565	164	6.4
Hispanic	1,930	204	10.6
Asian	784	11	1.4
Total*	10,644	1,022	9.6

* Totals include Native American students.



PHOTO: LESLIE STAROBIN

3. Boston middle schools are suspending a consistently larger percentage of Hispanic students every year.

Compared to a 9.1% increase in the student suspension rate for all middle schools students in Boston, the increase for Hispanic students suspended over a three year period has been 39.5%. While in 1982-83, only about one out of every 13 Hispanic students was suspended, by 1984-85, nearly one out of nine Hispanic students in Boston middle schools experienced at least one annual suspension.

In contrast, while the percentage of black students suspended was highest each year, this percentage varied little from a low of 11.1% in 1983-84 to a high of 12.0% in 1984-85. During that period the percentage of white students suspended rose from 5.8% to 6.4% representing a 10.3% rate of change (Table 3).

Table 3: Middle School Student Suspension Rates by Race

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	TOTAL
1982-83	11.6	5.8	7.6	8.8
1983-84	11.0	6.2	9.6	8.9
1984-85	12.0	6.4	10.6	9.6
Rate of Change	+ 3.4	+ 10.3	+ 39.5	+ 9.1

4. Boston middle schools suspend black students in numbers disproportionate to their numbers in the middle school population.

While blacks represent half of all middle school students, they consistently represent over 60% of all middle school students suspended: 65.6% in 1982-83; 62.6% in 1983-84; and 62.4% in 1984-85. White students are consistently underrepresented, while Hispanic students, in tandem with increasing student suspension rates, show increased

The increasing rate of Hispanic students suspended from middle schools should be especially alarming given high dropout rates for Hispanic students and given that Hispanic students are disproportionately represented in the dropout population. High rates for Hispanic students may reflect school practices and routines which are culturally insensitive to the needs of these youth. In schools where the student population is culturally diverse but the school's climate favors the norms of the dominant culture, chances for mistakes resulting in disciplinary problems are high. In addition, some bilingual educators speculate that Hispanic students making the transition into monolingual classes are likely to be uncertain of the rules in their new settings. In trying to figure out the norms of a new placement, these students may overstep their bounds and find themselves in trouble. Whatever the reasons, the increase in Hispanic students suspended raises concerns that school engagement is weakening among these students.

representation in the number of suspensions (Table 4). Indeed, while Hispanic students suspended are currently proportionate to their numbers in the middle school population as a whole, if their student suspension rate continues to grow at the same pace, like blacks, they will soon be suspended at rates disproportionate to their numbers.

Disproportionate student suspensions have been reported elsewhere, primarily at the high school level, both nationally and, less recently, in Boston (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985; *Boston Globe*, November 12, 1981). At any grade level, disproportionate suspensions constitute a warning that school-based disciplinary practices result in unequal and discriminatory treatment of minority students. Such disparities are symptoms that draw attention to the need to look at school routines, staff expectations, and adult-student interactions in a careful, systematic way to diagnose the reasons for discriminatory treatment of minority students.

The increasing rate of Hispanic students suspended from middle schools should be especially alarming given high dropout rates for Hispanic students and given that Hispanic students are disproportionately represented in the dropout population. High rates for Hispanic students may reflect school practices and routines which are culturally insensitive to the needs of these youth.

Students themselves are acutely aware of fairness issues in a school climate. Moreover, they are sensitive to the "hidden curriculum" inherent in excluding disproportionate numbers of any one group. Consequently, both blacks and Hispanics, groups experiencing high likelihood of exclusion, and whites, who observe disproportionate suspensions, learn that exclusion is a preferred alternative to in-school consequences or approaches that strive for participatory solving of problems. A school climate that relies on exclusion of students to maintain control may keep order in the short run. However, in the long run, all students are denied the opportunity to learn alternative ways of resolving disputes.

In addition, to the extent that disproportionate suspensions are perceived by black and Hispanic students as racial discrimination, minority overrepresentation in the numbers of students suspended is a situation that contributes to dropping out. Black students who drop out of school are particularly sensitive to the expression of institutional racism and perceive suspension as rejection (Felice, 1981).

5. Approximately 41% of all suspensions in middle schools are repeat suspensions.

The number of individual students suspended is in itself high in Boston's middle schools. In addition, School Department statistics show approximately 1.5 suspensions for every student suspended, indicating that many Boston middle school students experience multiple suspensions. Indeed, 46%, 40%, and 38% (averaging 41%) of all suspensions given were multiple suspensions in 1982-83, 1983-84, and 1984-85 respectively. Systemwide suspensions reflect these multiple suspensions: 16.3 suspensions for every 100 students in 1982-83; 14.8 in 1983-84; and 15.4 in 1984-85. By comparison, in Massachusetts in 1980, all schools showed 4.7 suspensions for every 100 students enrolled.

Moreover, the number of suspensions for every 100 black students is even higher: 21.2 in 1982-83; 18.5 in 1983-84; and 19.8 in 1984-85. Hispanics also experience high rates, about equal to the rate for Boston middle schools overall. The rate for whites, while lower than that for blacks or Hispanics, is still higher than the statewide rate (Table 5).

Suspension raises student concerns about who "belongs" and who does not. The perception of prejudice can undermine an already tenuous trust in the school, ultimately feeding a student's conclusion that "school is not for me."

Table 4: Percentage of Students Suspended Compared to Percentage of Enrollment by Race

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN
1982-83				
% Suspended	65.6	19.1	14.1	1.1
% Enrolled	49.6	28.7	16.2	5.1
1983-84				
% Suspended	62.6	17.7	19.2	.4
% Enrolled	50.1	25.6	17.4	6.3
1984-85				
% Suspended	62.4	16.0	20.0	1.1
% Enrolled	49.8	24.1	18.1	7.4

*Chi square = 117.2 in 1982-83; 114.0 in 1983-84; 120.5 in 1984-85, significant at the .001 level

The effect of multiple suspensions on students at risk in Boston's middle schools is not hard to imagine. First, each one of these suspensions typically represents up to three days of lost learning. While students receiving a three-day suspension may be told they can return sooner if they come accompanied by a parent, the reality is that parents are sometimes unwilling or, more often, unable to come because of paid work or responsibilities for younger children.

Table 5: Number of Suspensions per Hundred of Boston Middle School Students by Race

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN	TOTAL
1982-83					
Suspensions	1,221	342	305	18	1,890
Suspensions/100 Students	21.2	10.3	16.2	3.1	16.3
1983-84					
Suspensions	1,052	329	287	4	1,676
Suspensions/100 Students	18.5	11.1	14.5	.6	14.8
1984-85					
Suspensions	1,048	241	323	16	1,637
Suspensions/100 Students	19.8	9.4	16.7	2.0	15.4

This practice, rationalized as an attempt to engage parents in supporting school efforts, actually sets into motion a process that further alienates the student. Once learning time is lost, the extra effort required to catch up may be more than a vulnerable student can manage without help. Yet students repeatedly suspended are hardly the students who obtain special attention. Labeled as "bad actors" or "troublemakers," these are not the students most teachers go out of their way to help. Consequently, as they fall further and further behind in their schoolwork, students often feel they have a choice between one negative label or another. As a community worker observed, "If you're 13, you'd rather be 'bad' than 'stupid'. Your sense of competence is on the line here." Over time, students hear themselves labeled so often, they come to believe they are no better than their labels.

Moreover, days lost due to suspension can easily spill over into days lost to truancy. As Kay Walsh of the Bayside Council for Children's Truancy Committee puts it, "If the school suspends you on Monday afternoon for three days, do you really think you're going to bother to come back on Friday that week?" One kind of negative experience soon leads to another and into a cycle which may push students to the point of leaving school altogether.

The frequent use of suspension in Boston's middle schools directly undermines both student achievement and student attendance. In a less observable way, it is a practice which erodes a student's feeling of belonging in the school, reinforces student perceptions of racial discrimination, and undermines young adolescents' sense of self-esteem. Ultimately, multiple suspensions in middle school communicate a strong message of rejection and pave the way to dropping out.

6. Student suspension rates—a measure of students' risk of being suspended—vary widely from school to school.

Variations in student suspension rates indicate differences in responses to student discipline and suggest differences in school climate. Schools with low student suspension rates are likely to have developed alternatives to suspension and to define "suspendable offenses" very narrowly. In contrast, high student suspension rates in individual schools are likely to be symptoms of a disorderly climate in which both learning and teaching are difficult. Moreover, high rates indicate schools where "suspendable offenses" are more broadly defined and where staff discretion and subjectivity may result in an overuse of suspension. Such variations are the strongest evidence that school-based factors—school organization, leadership, staff training, and institutional focus, as well

as the existence of alternatives to suspension—play a powerful role in determining the level of student engagement or disengagement in middle schools.

Clearly, while all middle school students had approximately one in nine chances of being suspended between 1982 and 1985, the risk of suspension was much higher in some schools than in others, reaching about one in four at the Edwards and Mackey in 1982–83 and 1983–84 respectively and nearly one in three at the Michelangelo in 1984–85! If an outbreak of similar proportions of tuberculosis, hepatitis, or food poisoning had occurred in middle schools in one district during this period, public health officials would have imposed emergency measures to prevent contagion, examined school practices, and identified causes of the epidemic in the school environment! High student suspension rates in individual schools require similar treatment. These schools stand in sharp contrast to schools where few students were suspended during that same period. At the Taft, students' chances of suspension were never greater than one in 50, and in 1983–84, only two students at the Holmes were suspended during the entire year (Table 6).

Table 6: Range of Student Suspension Rates by School

	LOW	HIGH	SYSTEMWIDE
1982–83	1.0	26.8	8.8
	(Taft)	(Edwards)	
1983–84	.5	25.7	8.9
	(Holmes)	(Mackey)	
1984–85	1.7	30.8	9.6
	(Taft)	(Michelangelo)	

7. Use of multiple suspensions also varies dramatically from school to school.

While the rate of suspension for all Boston middle schools has been relatively stable at an average of 15.5 suspensions for every 100 students over a three-year period, some schools use suspension fewer than ten times each year while others use suspension hundreds of times. Given this variation, it is clear that students in one school have much higher chances of being suspended than students in another school.

Table 7 shows the range of school suspension rates compared to systemwide rates for three years.

During this period, the Taft and Holmes consistently had the lowest suspension rates. Other schools with three-year average rates below 7.8, half the systemwide average of 15.5, include the Edison (5.7), Rogers (4.5), Wilson (3.8), Dearborn (6.4), and King (6.0) Schools.

During the same period, seven schools had three-year average suspension rates above 22.8, half again above the systemwide average of 15.5. These include the Curley (30.5), Roosevelt (34.4), Thompson (26.5), Edwards (39.9), Michelangelo (44.6), Timilty (29.0), and Mackey (35.3).

Table 7: Range of School Suspension Rates for Boston Middle Schools

	LOW		HIGH		ALL SCHOOLS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1982-83	5	1.0	430	84.8	1,890	16.3
	(Taft)		(Edwards)			
1983-84	2	.5	240	53.2	1,676	14.8
	(Holmes)		(Mackey)			
1984-85	9	2.3	190	76.0	1,637	15.4
	(Dearborn)		(Michelangelo)			
3-Year Average	5	1.7	287	44.6	1,734	15.5
	(Taft, Holmes)		(Michelangelo)			

8. Five Boston middle schools have suspended fewer than 5% of their students every year for three years.

In addition to the Taft and Holmes, three other middle schools had student suspension rates under 5% for all three years. These include the Edison, Rogers, and Wilson.

Eight additional schools also reported three-year average rates no greater than 9.1, the systemwide average for three years. These were: the Irving (8.7), Lewenberg (6.7), Shaw Middle (7.3), Cleveland (6.2), Dearborn (4.4), Barnes (5.3), King (5.2), and Wheatley (6.6). Of these, however, only the Irving and the Dearborn showed a steady decrease in both numbers and percentages of students suspended from 1982 to 1985.

Finally three other schools have made significant improvements since 1982, with 1984-85 rates less than half their 1982-83 rates although their three-year average remains above the system-wide average. These schools include the Lewis (10.3 to 3.7), the Gavin (18.7 to 8.6), and the Edwards (26.8 to 10.2).

Table 8 shows student suspension rates for each of these schools for three years.

Table 8: Student Suspension Rates for Selected Middle Schools

	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	3-YEAR AVG.
All schools	8.8	8.9	9.6	9.1
Edison	3.8	4.0	4.9	4.2
Taft	1.0	1.6	1.7	1.4
Lewis**	10.3	15.2	3.7	9.7
Irving	14.2	8.0	4.4	8.9
Lewenberg*	5.2	12.9	7.7	8.6
Shaw*	4.6	8.4	9.0	7.3
Rogers	3.6	2.7	4.2	3.5
Cleveland*	4.4	5.0	9.2	6.2
Holmes	1.6	.5	2.5	1.5
Wilson	2.7	3.4	4.4	3.5
Dearborn*	7.5	4.0	1.8	4.4
Gavin*	18.7	4.6	8.6	10.6
Edwards**	26.8	13.2	10.2	16.7
Barnes*	2.7	6.4	6.9	5.3
King*	2.7	4.0	8.8	5.2
Wheatley*	8.3	4.7	6.7	6.6

* Three-year average below systemwide average.

** 1984-85 rates less than half rates for 1982-83.

Clearly, some schools have reduced their out-of-school suspension rate, an important step toward reducing student vulnerability to dropping out. In the case of some schools, lower student suspension rates may reflect the systematic efforts of the principal to identify and properly supervise individual teachers whose disciplinary referrals account for a high proportion of suspensions in that school. This strategy can both bring rates down and change the climate in particular classrooms for every student, thus strengthening the holding power of the school in a structural way. In other schools, low rates may reflect use of alternatives to suspension such as after-school detention or the presence of RECAP staff assigned to intervene on behalf of students before potentially explosive situations escalate.

On the other hand, in some schools, low student suspension rates may simply reflect a reluctance to put students on the street. While this response is a first step in reengaging potentially alienated students, second and third steps are needed to assure that students who are disciplined have opportunities to learn

self-discipline, to re-engage in the school community, and to continue academic learning. Disciplined students who are assigned to sit in the school office, to accompany the assistant principal on daily rounds, or isolated in a room for "bad kids" do not have such opportunities.

We are also aware that low suspension rates may reflect a school's failure to record and report "unofficial" suspensions. Students, parents, and community workers all report incidents which result in students being dismissed "to cool off" for the day or until they return with a parent. This response has several apparent advantages. From the perspective of the school, it saves staff unwanted paperwork and allows the school's record to appear more benign than it may be in reality. From the perspective of students and parents, disciplinary action may not appear on student records, and parents and students may be spared the embarrassment of an official suspension. We question, however, whether this strategy of sweeping problems under the rug does, in the long run, benefit either the student or the school.

9. Seven middle schools reported three-year average student suspension rates over one and a half times greater than the average rate for all middle schools.

These include the Curley, Roosevelt, Thompson, Edwards, Michelangelo, Timilty, and Mackey Schools (Table 9).

Table 9: Student Suspension Rates for Selected Middle Schools

	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	3-YEAR AVG.
All Schools	8.8	8.9	9.6	9.1
Curley	11.5	19.3	21.7	17.5
Roosevelt	24.1	20.3	14.7	19.7
Thompson	13.7	11.0	21.9	15.5
Edwards	26.8	13.2	10.2	16.7
Michelangelo	15.1	12.6	30.8	19.5
Timilty	10.7	21.3	21.3	17.8
Mackey	13.0	25.7	18.5	19.1

In three schools—the Roosevelt, Michelangelo, and Mackey—nearly 20% of all students were suspended during this three-year period. In none of these schools in any school year were fewer than 10% of the students suspended. Such figures suggest that high numbers of students in these schools during this time were put at risk for later dropping out. Moreover, in four schools—the Curley, Thompson, Michelangelo, and Timilty—the percentage of students suspended showed substantial increases between the 1982-83 and 1984-85 school years. Such increases indicate a continued unwillingness or inability to educate all students in those schools.

10. The number of students suspended from these seven schools alone account for half of all students suspended in all Boston middle schools across the City.

Table 10 presents data showing the number of students suspended for all seven schools in relation to the total number of students suspended systemwide. This percentage is then compared to the percentage of the total population enrolled in the seven schools. For example, in 1984-85, 53.8% of all students suspended were attending one of these seven schools, yet the combined enrollment for these schools was only 26.8% of the population.

Interestingly, the schools with high student suspension rates represent a range in school

size typical of the system. Small size alone does not guarantee acceptable standards of order or fairness.

Table 10: Percentage of All Students Suspended in Relation to the Percentage of All Middle School Students Enrolled in Seven Middle Schools

	# SUSPENDED*	SUSPENSION RATE	% SYSTEMWIDE**
1982-83	486	47.6	26.0
1983-84	543	53.7	26.6
1984-85	550	53.8	26.8

* Curley, Roosevelt, Thompson, Edwards, Michelangelo, Timilty, Mackey.

** Twenty-four schools.

11. Approximately one half of all black middle school students and two-thirds of all Hispanic students suspended come from the seven middle schools with the highest student suspension rates.

While only about one quarter of all black middle school students are enrolled in the seven middle schools with the highest suspension rates, slightly more than half of all black students suspended attend these schools. Even more dramatically, over two-thirds of all Hispanic middle school students suspended attend these schools although these schools enroll only about 40% of Hispanic middle school students.

Moreover, while the proportion of blacks and Hispanics represented in these schools has remained about the same, the proportion of suspended students coming from these schools has increased. This increase is especially clear in the case of Hispanic students.

The percentage of white students suspended also totals twice their proportion in the populations of these schools although their numbers are fewer. About 35% of all white students suspended citywide are enrolled in these schools compared to their 15% representation in the enrollment of these schools.

Table 11 depicts the students suspended in seven selected middle schools as a percentage of all middle school students suspended compared to the percentage of enrollment.

Obviously, students attending one of these seven middle schools have a high chance of suspension. School improvement efforts aimed

at reducing numbers of out-of-school suspensions in six¹ schools alone could improve the educational experience for hundreds of students. However, we caution again that student suspensions should be considered only a symptom of a climate which is likely to be inhospitable to learning. The goal of any school improvement effort in these schools should go beyond changing numbers to examining, diagnosing, and treating conditions which foster high student suspension rates.

Table 11: Students Suspended in Selected Middle Schools as a Percentage of All Students Suspended Compared to Enrollment

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN	TOTAL
1982-83					
% All Students Suspended	47.2	35.4	63.2	90.9	47.6
% Middle School Enrollment	25.8	16.4	39.0	43.2	26.0
1983-84					
% All Students Suspended	55.8	31.8	66.0	75.0	53.7
% Middle School Enrollment	25.7	15.9	40.7	39.1	26.6
1984-85					
% All Students Suspended	53.6	33.5	70.6	63.6	53.8
% Middle School Enrollment	25.3	15.5	40.5	41.5	26.8

1. The Michelangelo School has been closed since June 1985.

12. Eight middle schools with high suspension rates show black students receiving high proportions of all suspensions.

Table 12: Three-Year Average Proportion of Suspensions Received by Black Students Compared to Three-Year Average Black Enrollment by School

	BLACK STUDENTS		ALL STUDENTS
	% Enrolled	% Suspended	% Suspended
All schools	49.8	63.8	15.5
Curley	40.6	56.6	30.5
Roosevelt	48.3	76.1	34.4
Irving	44.5	86.5	15.9
Gavin	41.7	63.7	16.9
Edwards	27.9	49.5	39.9
Michelangelo	42.3	75.7	44.6
Timilty	50.5	66.1	29.0
Mackey	51.7	71.6	35.3

These data suggest that in some schools where suspension is frequently used, black students may be bearing the burden of the overuse of out-of-school-suspension. In these schools, unequal treatment of minority students decreases the holding power of those schools.

In these schools, not only is the three-year average suspension rate above the systemwide average of 15.5, but the proportion of suspensions received by black students is ten or more percentage points higher than would be expected based on the percentage of black students in the population.

Table 12 presents figures showing black suspensions as a percentage of all suspensions compared to black enrollment in the school averaged for three years. For example, at the Edwards, 49.5% of all school suspensions were received by black students while only 27.9% of all students enrolled were black.

Such data suggest that in some schools where suspension is frequently used, black students may be bearing the burden of the overuse of out-of school-suspension. In these schools, unequal treatment of minority students decreases the holding power of those schools.

TO WHOSE BENEFIT? RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS AND DROPPING OUT

School suspensions are not necessary to maintain order in middle schools. To the contrary, suspensions are more likely to reflect a disorderly climate where school staff have failed to communicate compelling reasons for student cooperation, teach self-discipline, or develop a school community that acknowledges the importance of meeting young adolescents' normal developmental needs. In fact, some educators estimate that four out of every five school disruptions result from the way the school or classroom is run (Kaeser, 1979)!

Not only are school suspensions unnecessary, but they are directly harmful to the most vulnerable students in middle schools. Increasingly, it is apparent that the use of school suspensions itself pushes students to the point of dropping out, a finding confirmed by the following:

- A national study of school suspensions by the Children's Defense Fund reported that suspension was a significant factor contributing to dropping out. Almost 11 percent of the young people surveyed who were out of school named suspension as the experience that had triggered their decision to leave school permanently (Children's Defense Fund, 1975).
- At the high school level nationally, black students are suspended three times as often as white students. Moreover, while minority students make up about 25% of the school population, they make up about 40% of all suspended and expelled students (NCAS, 1985).
- Black students who drop out of school are more likely to come from schools with disproportionately high rates of minority student suspensions and expulsions. In a study of black students who leave school before graduating, one researcher concluded that these students experience suspension as a "rejection policy" reflecting racial discrimination which, in turn, is cited as a contributing factor to dropping out (Felice, 1981).

- According to a 1986 study, Boston high school dropouts are more than twice as likely to have been suspended the previous year than students who stay in school. Of the students who dropped out during 1984-85, 15.2% had been suspended at least once the previous year compared to 7.2% of those students who stayed in school (Camayd-Freixas, 1986).
- National statistics relating school suspensions to dropping out parallel findings in Boston. Analyzing data from a national longitudinal study of sophomore students first surveyed in 1980 and followed up in 1982, researchers from the University of Wisconsin have concluded that the experience of suspension or being put on probation markedly distinguishes school dropouts from non-college-bound students who do graduate. Findings indicate that 44% of black dropouts, 31% of Hispanic dropouts, and 26% of white dropouts had been suspended or put on probation at least once compared to 19%, 17%, and 11% of their respective stay-in counterparts (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986).

Suspension assumes that basic school rules and guidelines for their enforcement are sound. It rests on the belief that punishment and temporary exclusion will motivate students to correct their behavior. Suspension is the least expensive approach to discipline: few resources are required to send a student home from school. Finally, as one Boston middle grades educator observed, "Suspension is the least creative way to deal with problems. It amounts to two words—'Get out!' How uncreative can you get?"

Common sense tells us that students who are not in school cannot be learning the skills they need for future progress. Furthermore, research findings show strong correlation between school suspensions and dropping out. Why, then, do Boston's middle schools persist in suspending students at increasing rates?

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: STUDENT CONTROL OR SCHOOL REFORM?

Given the likelihood that normal adolescent changes will result in increased conflict between students and their schools, school staff can make conscious choices regarding the preferred response to such changes. They can choose, on the one hand, to focus disciplinary measures on correcting and controlling the behavior of individual students. Suspension assumes that basic school rules and guidelines for their enforcement are sound. It rests on the belief that punishment and temporary exclusion will motivate students to correct their behavior. Suspension is the least expensive approach to discipline: few resources are required to send a student home from school. Finally, as one Boston middle grades educator observed, "Suspension is the least creative way to deal with problems. It amounts to two words—'Get out!' How uncreative can you get?"

On the other hand, schools can intervene with extra attention and support for individual students in the belief that disciplinary problems reflect students' individualized needs such as emotional problems or undetected learning disabilities. This practice, rather than leading to suspension, can result in mobilizing services designed to help students adjust to school rules and control difficult impulses. Indeed,

regulations in the Massachusetts special education law, Chapter 766, reflect this approach. According to Chapter 766 regulation 315.0, effective September 1, 1986, school principals must consider students suspended five days or more in one quarter for referral for a special education evaluation and must notify students' parents in writing of their right to make their own referral if the school decides against making one. Overuse of special education placement, however, could result in additional numbers of students misclassified and misplaced in substantially separate classes in Boston schools, an abuse of the special education system already well known (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1978).

The sheer number of students suspended every year in Boston's middle schools, however, suggests that the interaction between students and the school structure itself accounts for the overuse of suspension as a response to discipline problems. Indeed, both high numbers of suspensions and widely varying school-based rates recommend changing schools rather than students, an approach emphasizing school improvement efforts to reduce the number of middle school suspensions on a school-by-school basis.

MIDDLE SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS: EXCLUSION IS NO SOLUTION

An orderly climate in middle schools relies to a greater extent on a set of negotiated rules that invite the cooperation of students who, it is understood, will test and challenge established limits. Moreover, effective enforcement of rules in middle schools relies on teaching students to take responsibility for themselves rather than on controlling students.

Young adolescents do need the structure and clear limits of an orderly school as a basis for learning. However, students who are making the transition into adolescence also have other, more complicated developmental needs: needs for meaningful participation in the school, for positive interaction with adults and peers, and for opportunities for self-exploration and self-definition. Consequently, in middle schools, the conditions for an orderly learning climate must become more democratic, with greater emphasis on the school as a community of consenting individuals that includes both adults and students in decision-making opportunities.

While an orderly climate in elementary schools may be imposed on students, an orderly climate in middle schools relies to a greater extent on a set of negotiated rules that invite the cooperation of students who, it is understood, will test and challenge established limits. Moreover, effective enforcement of rules in middle schools relies on teaching students to take responsibility for themselves rather than on controlling students. In fact, efforts to control students can backfire in the form of increased student frustration and resentment. We talked, for example, to student after student who expressed anger at being treated "like babies," made to walk through their hallways in single file without talking or required to sit at sex-segregated tables in their lunchrooms. By the middle grade level, schools which rely on establishing order in such ways risk losing students' allegiance to their school.

Recent research on middle schools has identified aspects of a positive school climate that contribute to improved school discipline and reduce the need for out-of-school suspension. Most important, middle schools with effective disciplinary strategies make a commitment to the social and personal development of students as a goal worthwhile in itself, not just as a means to academic achievement (Dorman, 1982; Lipsitz, 1984). Consequently, the focus of disciplinary procedures in effective middle schools is on developing self-discipline rather than on imposing punishment to establish control. An orderly climate emerges because shared rules are "owned" by students and adults alike, not because non-conforming students are excluded.

In fact, observers of four effective middle schools in New York City recently described what such "ownership" of shared rules looks like in practice. In these schools, observers watched as some students approached certain disruptive students to inform them, "We don't do things that way here." (Fruchter, 1986). This expression of ownership helps younger students and students new to the school become socialized to the norms of the school and learn self-discipline in the process.

The importance of such an approach is also highlighted in other studies which emphasize that discipline improves in middle schools where students have opportunities for meaningful decision-making and positive, concentrated relationships with caring adults (Epstein, 1981).

Most students in middle schools are suspended for being disorderly or "disruptive," offenses which do not necessarily pose serious harm. Moreover, "disruption" means different things to different people. Behavior that the science teacher cannot handle might be skillfully managed by the language arts teacher in the same school. Behavior considered disruptive by the gym teacher in one school might be viewed as normal and acceptable by the gym teacher in another. Behavior, such as chewing gum or carrying a purse in one school can be considered "inappropriate behavior" and a threat to classroom order in one school and disregarded in another.

When schools are structured into interdisciplinary teams or clusters, teachers can develop a uniform set of rules as a way of avoiding inconsistent application of rules. When schools organize themselves into units small enough for students to have intense and consistent relationships with one or a few adults, school staff are also more likely to be aware of individual students' moods and personalities. Such familiarity can reduce the potential for interpersonal mistakes such as misidentification and stereotyping that are common in large, more impersonal settings (Lipsitz, 1984). Indeed, the importance of increasing personal and individualized contact between students and adults becomes even more crucial in Boston's middle schools where, under the system's *Code of Discipline*, failure to identify oneself is grounds for suspension. Such a consequence, in fairness, requires schools to devise approaches which reduce the potential for confrontation between unfamiliar adults and students and increase the likelihood that all students will be well known on sight.

IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION: A REAL ALTERNATIVE?

The recognition that out-of-school suspensions are harmful is the basis for the establishment of in-school suspension programs in some Boston middle schools. These programs are a step in the right direction in that their purpose is to keep students in school. However, in-school suspension programs, unmonitored and viewed only in terms of the narrow goal of keeping students in the school building, can create an illusion of progress where little exists.

All too often, in-school suspension programs, like out-of-school suspensions, fail to address the root causes of a disorderly school climate. In-school suspension programs which are designed only to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions may hide the fact that large numbers of students are still being excluded from their classrooms. In some schools, an in-school suspension room can become a dumping ground for students who are referred there by teachers unskilled in classroom management. Several students we interviewed reported just that situation. Said one: "First you get sent to the detention room for a few hours or maybe a day. But if you get sent there too many times, pretty soon you don't get out. Maybe they give you a little work to do, but they don't really care." Another student reported being required to complete pages of "punishment papers" of multiplication tables in in-school suspension, a practice which promises to communicate only negative messages about learning. These "suspensions" are typically not counted in reporting the official suspension rate so cannot be considered in assessing a school's effectiveness.

In-school suspension programs can also hide other problems. Just as black students are disproportionately represented in out-of-school suspensions, the same disproportions may be reflected in in-school suspensions. However, because such suspensions are not counted or analyzed, possible race discrimination may continue unaddressed or unnoticed.

Finally, as with out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspension may represent a short-term solution to student misbehavior. In-school suspension, however, does not correct specific

school conditions which contribute to misbehavior. When such problems go unaddressed, the number of students losing out on their education is not likely to decline. Indeed, some in-school suspension programs may create additional problems for students.

Several students we interviewed for this report described such a program at the Edwards. According to these students, both of whom had been held back in grade, they had been assigned to a sixth grade class with other "repeaters." Because none of them liked school very much, they "acted up," sending paper airplanes across the room and once conspiring to put a tack on the teacher's seat. As a result, they reported, their class "got blamed for everything." In spite of talks from the principal and assistant principal, disruption continued. During this time, several students were sent to in-school suspension, sometimes for a whole day, sometimes for several days.

One day, the principal appeared to tell the class he had had enough and that the students had had all the chances they would get. "He told us he was going to insulate us," students said. "He said, 'Don't go to your lockers or homeroom. Meet me at the home ec. room'." That day, the principal escorted the entire class to the in-school suspension room and, according to students, told them their teachers would come to them there from that time on. Moreover, students said, the assistant principal warned them that if they were absent for three days while "insulated," he would take them to court.

From that time on, students were, indeed, isolated from their peers. According to students' reports, windows of the classroom were covered with cardboard so no one could look in, and special rules were posted. Students no longer had recess or gym, and they were escorted two by two to the bathroom and to their bus each afternoon. During lunch, the principal escorted the entire class to lunch at a time when these students would be alone in the lunchroom. Each student ate lunch at a separate table, and no one was allowed chocolate milk or dessert.

Although students said they complained that this situation was not fair, no changes were made, and these students spent 44 days in "in-school suspension." The *Boston Globe* of July 24, 1986 reported that School Department officials would look into students' complaints. In the meantime, at least one 15 year old we met from that class doubts he will continue his schooling.

Although some Boston middle schools do use in-school suspension rather than out-of-school suspension, the School Department does not routinely collect statistics on in-school suspension. Indeed, the information void about the use of in-school suspension in schools is matched only by a lack of guidance regarding the implementation of in-school suspension programs. Both monitoring and the establishment of program guidelines are needed to ensure that in-school suspension practices do not repeat the out-of-school suspension patterns of overuse and discrimination. Basic operating principles should clarify that the goals of in-school suspension are to help students learn self-discipline and improve school climate, not simply to keep students off the streets or make the school's record look better. Guidelines should reflect the commitment of Boston schools to correct the conditions which have failed to engage students and to help improve classroom climate. In addition to a clear statement of purpose for the program, guidelines should include:

- Written procedures developed with teachers, students, and parents clearly stating how students are referred and assigned to in-school suspension;
- Designation of an administrator responsible for determining whether assignment of students to the program is appropriate and who has the authority and resources to pursue other actions which are more appropriate and helpful than referral;
- Provision of an academic component to allow referred students to keep up with the regular classroom instruction without missing important parts of work in progress;
- Requirements that teachers continue to provide daily resources, materials, and worksheets to referred students;



PHOTO: LESLIE STAROBIN

In-school suspension programs which are designed only to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions may hide the fact that large numbers of students are still being excluded from their classrooms. In some schools, an in-school suspension room can become a dumping ground for students who are referred there by teachers unskilled in classroom management.

- Provision of a counseling component with someone who can help referred students sort out emotions and explore alternative classroom behaviors;
- Provisions for notifying and engaging parents without requiring a parent conference as a condition for the student's return to the regular classroom;
- Procedures for monitoring and follow-up of individual student progress;
- Provisions for collecting information summarizing the numbers of students assigned to in-school suspension for each quarter by race and referring teacher and reporting this information.

Only when these provisions are in place can a school claim to have a real in-school suspension program. Without them, students remain in danger of being virtually discarded for three days at a time, but to the assistant principal's office rather than the street.

SCHOOL RULES: VIEWS OF STUDENTS AT RISK

Middle school students we interviewed claim to know all the rules in their schools and readily cite them. Occasionally, the rules named were surprising. When asked to name the three most important school rules, one middle schooler replied, "No fighting, no weapons, and no shorts." A second student named "No fighting, no carrying purses, and no wearing hooded sweatshirts." Other rules students cited included "No smoking," "No chewing gum," "No stealing," "No cutting classes," "No running in the hallways," "No drugs," "No talking in classes," "No more than seven absences each term," "No eating candy which will attract bugs in school," "No toys," and "Respect the teachers."

Many students we interviewed have learned these rules by breaking them. From their own experience, they offer reasons that explain why they and other students in their school break the rules. Their explanation and insight are evidence of their skill in perceiving some of the emotional needs reflected in school misbehavior. Students break rules "to show they are cool," "to show off," "for attention," "to be wise," and "because they don't like school." In other words, students themselves are aware that middle schoolers break rules in an attempt to define themselves in relation to

others. They are also aware of something adults sometimes forget: Young people who feel unsafe or uncertain about putting feelings of loneliness, disappointment, or anger into words communicate these feelings by action. Only a few of these students reported that any adult in the school had taken them aside to teach them more appropriate ways of getting some of their needs met. Instead, the school's solution was to send them home, away from a situation they could not cope with and, apparently, from adults who could not cope with them.

Interestingly, many students we interviewed think most of their school rules are fair but are confused when different teachers establish different sets of rules. "Some tell you one thing. Others tell you other things," reported Keith, a 13 year old in sixth grade. "Some let you chew gum, and some don't," echoes Sandra. An equal number feel that school staff implement the rules unfairly and inconsistently. Many talked of teachers who "have pets," "choose favorites" or "pick on one kid." The sense of having been treated unfairly lingers with students who talk of disciplinary encounters with their teachers or school principal. Larry and Terri are two such students:

Larry is bored in his science class where "you just sit there and copy off a chalkboard." Besides, he thinks of his teacher as a "witch" who "tries to get you in trouble." One day, says Larry, he was in the hall to get a pass for class. This teacher told the principal that Larry was causing trouble in the halls. Larry says, "I told the teacher not to lie." As a result he was suspended for three days for "answering back" to a teacher. He did not think he should have been suspended for this, and his sense of injustice made him all the more angry. "I felt like breaking the windows of my teacher's car and popping her tires," he says. Larry sees his principal often in the halls. The principal walks around a lot "to make sure that the students don't become rowdy." Larry does not want to discuss anything with his principal. Larry does not know the principal, but he believes the principal thinks of him as "a troublemaker."

Terri is a 13 year old in the eighth grade. She is small, quiet, and apparently shy, so it comes as a surprise that on several occasions she has been suspended "for fighting" and has received a disciplinary transfer to another school. When Terri is suspended she feels like "never going back" to school. In fact, Terri attends school only three days a week on the average. Terri has some problems at home and few friends at school. She wants to graduate from high school and take a year off before college and studying law. Lately, however, she has been worried she will not accomplish this because, she says, "I don't like school too much now."

Student observations indicate that suspensions, whether in-school or out-of-school, are really symptoms of a school climate where students are not involved in decision-making about school rules and where some, at least, perceive themselves as victims of unfair rule enforcement rather than as members of a school community which cares about their well-being and to which, in turn, they are accountable. Only a few students we interviewed for this report believe they can change a rule that they found unfair. "Nothing can be changed," said 15 year old David. "I tried to talk with the principal, but he said, 'Get out'." When only students' misbehavior is addressed, school-based factors contributing to student apathy and students' feelings of being disenfranchised can remain unacknowledged.

THE GOOD NEWS: SCHOOLS CAN MAKE CHANGES

Michael Fung, principal of the Taft, is one educator who does not believe in "time-out" practices or in-school suspension. He prefers to deal with discipline problems by analyzing the behavior and needs of the teachers making referrals for suspension, acting both to change the expectations of these teachers about their students' behavior and to improve their classroom management skills. When Mr. Fung

The sense of powerlessness some students we interviewed feel is especially dramatic given some of the circumstances students describe. One student we spoke with described a male reading teacher who routinely used physical force to discipline most members of the class, allegedly pushing students up against the classroom wall and once slapping a student. When we asked her whether individual students were singled out for abuse, she maintained that "all except for two Chinese girls" suffered. This student did not feel, however, that any one in the school would change this situation so she had not complained.

became principal of the Taft, the school's suspension rate was the highest in the district with 267 suspensions recorded in one year. Now scarcely a handful of Taft students are suspended every year.

Shortly after beginning as principal, Mr. Fung determined that only a small percentage of teachers were responsible for the bulk of all referrals for suspension from school. When it was made clear to these teachers that suspension was no longer a disciplinary alternative available to them, the teachers had to develop other means of managing students. With Mr. Fung's help, some teachers improved their skills in engaging students. Others transferred out of the school. One was fired. Now the Boston Teachers Union reports few grievances filed by teachers at the Taft. Moreover, the results really count with the students. As one current seventh grader at the Taft reports, "I love school. The teachers are nice, and everyone treats you fairly."

This is not to say that the Taft, like other middle schools, does not have its share of challenges in coping with the unpredictable behavior of changeable young adolescents. Taft students, like other students we interviewed, do report fighting among students.



PHOTO: UNITED WAY

Disciplinary practices, however, are narrowly focused and consistent with a concern for keeping students engaged. For example, after-school detention is the practice of choice in dealing with undisciplined or tardy students, and a late bus is available to transport detained students who do not walk to school. Moreover, students remaining after school do so with the disciplining teacher rather than in a special detention room.

While much of the responsibility for classroom discipline rests with teachers at the Taft, teachers can also rely on help from their principal in disciplining students. When apparently insurmountable problems persist with individual students in a classroom, teachers can send students to the principal. In his office, Mr. Fung or his assistant calls the student's parents to discuss the problem, soliciting parents' suggestions for a resolution. If parents are not available, Mr. Fung has a list of other adults who can be called for each student. By the same token, students know that if they disagree with a teacher about their treatment in a class, they can ask for a pass to

leave the class to appeal to Mr. Fung. One Taft student we interviewed also praised a policy which encourages students to bring a complaint to the student council for discussion. If the student council agrees by vote that a rule or teacher's decision is unfair, the matter will be brought to Mr. Fung. Discipline at the Taft, then, relies on open, two-way avenues of communication between students and adults.

Whatever the course of action, Boston's middle schools must find alternatives to suspension. The short-term costs of suspension are high in terms of days lost to learning for individual students. But the long-term costs are even higher. Suspension does not solve problems of disorderly schools. Rather suspension is symptomatic of disorderly schools. As long as we hold on to the illusion that suspension solves "the problem" by excluding disruptive students, the problems of disorderly and discriminatory school climates will persist and at the expense of large numbers of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders who are put at risk of dropping out.

CONCLUSION

One out of ten middle grade students is suspended annually in Boston, a practice which puts these students at risk of dropping out. While these students may need special attention and help with their behavior, it is the school climate that needs to be the major focus for school remediation. Rules developed without input of students, teachers who misbehave by name-calling or using abusive language with students, administrators who yell at students, and staff who implement rules unfairly or inconsistently all contribute to student alienation. A curriculum that fails to challenge students and address students'

developmental needs, sorting of students into separate classes for "nerds," "repeaters," or "bad kids," teaching approaches that do not actively involve students, and unresolved tensions among staff can all provide fertile ground for student misbehaviors that ultimately lead to suspension. Our finding that some schools have successfully established safe, orderly environments for learning leads us to believe that all schools can do so. Improving school climate within a context of meeting developmental needs of all young adolescents should be the first order of business for Boston's middle schools.

The McKinley Middle School: A Gauge of Boston's Concern

5

At first glance, the most striking aspect of students at the McKinley Middle School is that by anyone's standards they are students at risk of dropping out. The McKinley Middle School is Boston's substantially separate program for students with serious behavioral disabilities. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the profile of special education students at the McKinley parallels the profile of students at risk of dropping out of school. Moreover, Boston's own statistics indicate these students are especially vulnerable. Approximately one out of five (21.8%) of all Boston special education students dropped out of school during the 1984-85 school year alone (Camayd-Freixas, 1986).

The profile of students at risk includes characteristics which are easily recognized. Students at risk experience feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. Many have average intelligence but poor grades, possibly as a result of on-going educational neglect, possibly the result of undetected learning disabilities, possibly because their emotional needs sometimes get in the way of learning. Many have repeated a grade at least once. Because of negative experiences in school their motivation to attend school is weak. They cut classes, are often tardy, and have poor attendance. These students rarely participate in extra-curricular activities and have few friends. When the needs of these students include poor impulse control, they may act out their emotional needs in behavioral ways. Because they are often aggressive and disruptive, they are frequently suspended from school.

SEGREGATION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND?

The very existence of a segregated school for young adolescents with behavioral problems raises educational and philosophical questions about the wisdom of such a school. Prior to the enactment of special education laws, students in Boston with severe behavioral and emotional needs were routinely denied an education. At worst, such students were simply turned away at the door and told they could not be accommodated in school. At best, these students were placed in Boston's "special classes." All too often, these classes were "dumping grounds" for children whom teachers found difficult to handle and who

Students enrolled at the McKinley Middle School share this profile of high risk students with some additional features. Most have a long history of having been labeled "trouble-makers." Most have not committed crimes. Moreover, these students are the young adolescents who, of all the middle school students in Boston, most desperately need the benefits of an education that addresses their needs. These students are at risk of dropping out when they first walk in the door of the McKinley School. The McKinley's response to the needs of these students is a measure of Boston's commitment to engage and teach the most vulnerable middle school students at risk of dropping out.

While the McKinley School is usually seen as a separate school for students with special needs, it can also be understood as an alternative middle school enrolling students at high risk of dropping out. McKinley students are most in need of an alternative education program both because they are at risk of dropping out and because their earlier school experiences are likely to have been so "toxic" that they will have difficulty learning in a large, traditional middle school. Looking at the McKinley School through a dropout prevention filter, we can assess the School Department's record in meeting the needs of Boston's most vulnerable students. Moreover, as a school which segregates disabled students from the mainstream, the McKinley needs to show that the benefits of segregating students from their peers outweigh the negative aspects of their separation.

In many schools in our city "out of sight" has meant "out of mind" for students who are hardest to teach but most in need of good teaching. Segregation of any minority group in our society has historically resulted in neglect or abuse. When the minority consists of disabled students with low status, chances for neglect or abuse at the discretion of those in authority increase.

needed additional support services the schools would not provide. Instead of helping teachers improve classroom management skills or seeking appropriate services, principals removed students from their regular classrooms where they received little attention to either their academic or behavioral needs, marking time until they finally disappeared from school (Task Force on Children Out of School, 1971).

The enactment of Chapter 766 in Massachusetts and Public Law 94-142 on the federal level addressed the "wrongs" of such practices by establishing a set of rights of students with special needs to an equal, appropriate public education which ensures maximum development¹ of each child. These laws require schools to teach disabled children in settings as close to the "mainstream" as possible, a requirement based on the civil rights concept that separate is not equal. This requirement is also based on educational findings that children learn effectively from each other, particularly about social expectations and behavior, and that good educational practices will expose disabled students to the daily activities of their peers in order to maximize their chances to learn from other young people their age. When disabled students are segregated from their peers, they are denied this important source of learning. By the same token, some experts argue that grouping students with special needs together in the same setting has the harmful effect of actually encouraging inappropriate behavior. In such settings, students have only other students, whose behavioral skills are as limited as their own, as role models.

Placing children with special needs in a segregated school may have an additional harmful effect. The segregation of students in a "substantially separate" school like the McKinley has the effect of stigmatizing all young people enrolled in that school. Consequently, conversations overheard along the

street where the McKinley is located may include references to "the school for crazy kids." The net result is that all children in the school are seen in light of their deficits rather than their strengths, and they are seen as a category—"kids like these"—rather than as individuals.

The historical lesson of Boston's "special classes" is that in many schools in our city "out of sight" has meant "out of mind" for students who are hardest to teach but most in need of good teaching. Segregation of any minority group in our society has historically resulted in neglect or abuse. When the minority consists of disabled students with low status, chances for neglect or abuse at the discretion of those in authority increase. Moreover, the further schools remove these students from the mainstream, the more likely it becomes that school officials at upper levels can conveniently ignore the needs of students in segregated settings. At the same time, school staff have leeway to act in arbitrary ways without the inhibitions they might feel in a more integrated setting.

Students at the McKinley School are often the students who principals in traditional middle schools blame for disruptive school conditions. Indeed, the doubling of the McKinley's middle grades enrollment from 39 in 1982-83 to 80 in 1984-85 may, in itself, reflect an unwillingness or inability of middle schools to serve these students in mainstream settings. Such students act out their emotional needs through behavior which disturbs others, challenging the patience of adults who come in contact with them. Because of the nature of these young adolescents' disabilities, schools may confuse student behavior which requires treatment with behavior suggesting punishment. The result can be misuse of suspension for behavior which may be disruptive but is also related to a student's disability.

1. "Maximum possible development" is the legal standard used to measure progress of disabled students in special education.

SUSPENSION AT THE MCKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Statistics on out-of-school suspensions alone suggest that the McKinley Middle School has flagrantly overused suspension to control student behavior. Student suspension rates indicate that almost every student at the McKinley Middle School is suspended at least once, a practice that puts already vulnerable students at greater risk of school disengagement and later dropping out. School suspension rates

trigger alarm that many of these students experience multiple suspensions, a practice that both harms individual students and is a symptom of a disorderly climate for all students.

A review of official suspension statistics from the McKinley for three years indicates the following:

1. Eight out of ten students at the McKinley Middle School were suspended at least once each year between 1982 and 1985.

While an average 9.1% of students in Boston's conventional middle schools were suspended at least once a year between 1982-85, a disturbing statistic itself, an average 79.5% of students at the McKinley Middle School were suspended at least once a year. McKinley student suspension rates ranged from 87.2 in 1982-83 and 80.0 in 1983-84 to 71.3 in 1984-85 compared to 8.8, 8.9, and 9.6 in middle schools systemwide.

During those years, high rates persisted for all racial groups, with student suspension rates for blacks and Hispanics somewhat higher than for whites. Table 1 describes McKinley School student suspension rates by race for three years.

The percentage of McKinley students suspended compared with the percentage of all middle school students suspended is dramatic. Even with a decline in the student suspension rate, the fact that an average of eight out of every ten McKinley students are suspended at least once each year indicates that the vast majority of McKinley students, already at risk because of their disability, are put at greater risk of disengaging from school as a result of the school's reliance on suspension as an educational tool.

While some might argue that the special needs of students at the McKinley increase the likelihood that students will be suspended, in fact the opposite should be true. When students' behavior is related to their disability, educators are obligated to treat the behavior in ways that help students learn different ways of

reacting to stressful situations. A reliance on out-of-school suspension as an educational strategy does not allow for teaching students new ways of controlling difficult impulses or expressing themselves verbally. Indeed, any suspension is a signal that the educational programs for any given student is not working well. Suspensions are also an indication that school staff have either failed to pick up warning signs of a coming crisis or have not been able to intervene effectively to diffuse a difficult situation. That the large majority of McKinley students experience even one suspension strongly suggests that the special education program is not meeting the needs of these students.

Table 1: McKinley Middle School Student Suspensions by Race

	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN	TOTAL
1982-83					
Enrollment	18	18	2	1	39
# Suspended	18	14	1	1	34
% Suspended	100.0	77.8	50.0	100.0	87.2
1983-84					
Enrollment	24	23	8	0	55
# Suspended	19	17	8	0	44
% Suspended	79.2	73.9	100.0	0	80.0
1984-85					
Enrollment	37	26	16	1	80
# Suspended	27	17	12	1	57
% Suspended	73.0	65.4	75.0	100.0	71.3

2. Students with special needs at the McKinley are many times more likely to experience multiple suspensions than all students in traditional middle schools.

While the use of multiple suspensions in Boston middle schools already goes beyond sound educational practice, multiple suspensions are clearly the norm at the McKinley School. In 1982-83, 75% of all McKinley students suspended received more than one suspension. This percentage rose to 89% in 1983-84 and totaled 76% in 1984-85 (Table 2).

Table 2: Average Number of Suspensions Per McKinley Student by Race

	McKinley Middle School					ALL SCHOOLS
	BLACK	WHITE	HISPANIC	ASIAN	TOTAL	TOTAL
1982-83	4.5	3.6	2.0	1.0	4.0	1.8
1983-84	9.5	8.4	7.4	—	8.7	1.7
1984-85	4.8	3.4	4.2	5.0	4.2	1.6

This information paints a picture of a school which makes frequent use of suspension, not as a last resort, but as a routine strategy for disciplining students with special needs. At the extreme, during the 1983-84 school year the average number of suspensions for each McKinley student suspended was five times the number of suspensions for students suspended in middle schools citywide.

While each McKinley student suspended received an average of 4.0, 8.7, and 4.2 suspensions in school years 1982-83, 1983-84, and 1984-85, respectively, many students received above the average. For example, in 1982-83, 16 (47%) of all suspended students at the McKinley were suspended five times or more and five students were suspended ten times or more. The following year, 29 or 66% of students suspended received five suspensions or more, more than half of whom were suspended

ten or more times, including two students who received 27 and 32 suspensions, respectively. In 1984-85, 20 (35%) of all students suspended received five or more suspensions, six of whom were suspended ten or more times (Table 3). Even when each suspension lasts only one day, time lost from school is staggering.

Students experiencing multiple suspensions at the McKinley are twice handicapped, first by their own disability and then again by a behavior management system which is not working for the majority of the student population. The overuse of suspension may, in fact, reflect a basic approach to students with special needs which emphasizes controlling behavior to the point where program staff lose sight of the goal of helping students develop responsibility for their own behavior and learn appropriate ways to express themselves and interact with others.

In special education, as in regular education, multiple suspensions are both harmful and ineffective. According to Professor Barbara Burns of the Department of Child Study at Tufts University, a major risk of multiple suspensions is that over time the adult suspending the student may lose any educational or therapeutic relationship with the student. Moreover, the more suspensions a student experiences, the less effective they are likely to be as a means of changing behavior. In addition, Professor Burns warns that repeated punishment may also raise students' desire for retaliation, feelings that further contribute to acting out behavior.

The main implication of multiple suspensions at the McKinley is that the program is simply not promoting "maximum possible development" for its special education students. If, at best, over 70% of all students are suspended an average of four times each, we suspect that the adults in charge are failing both to intervene to reduce disruptive behaviors and to teach alternative behavior. Moreover, the persistent use of multiple suspensions raises concern that the school climate for all students is not conducive to learning. Our findings indicate that the McKinley needs to devise a more diverse set of strategies to address the individual learning needs of its students.

Table 3: Frequency of Suspensions for All Students Suspended, McKinley Middle School

	ENROLLMENT	STUDENTS SUSPENDED		
		1 + Times	5 + Times	10 + Times
1982-83	39	34	16 (47.1%)	5 (14.7%)
1983-84	55	44	29 (65.9%)	15 (34.1%)
1984-85	80	57	20 (35.1%)	6 (10.5%)

3. Most suspensions at the McKinley are related to behavior characteristics of special education students whose emotional needs result in acting out behavior.

Reported reasons for suspending McKinley students fall predominantly within two categories of offenses, both of which are closely associated with poor impulse control. The first category of offenses involves endangering the physical safety of another by the use of force or threats of force (*Code of Discipline*, Section 7.4). Thus, a student who threatens to fight another student, raises his hand, and steps forward, may be suspended on these grounds. The second category of suspendable offenses is for substantially and repeatedly disrupting school or classroom activity (*Code of Discipline*, Section 7.8). Under this category, a student who makes noise repeatedly in a classroom, preventing the teaching of others, may also be suspended. In both these instances, Boston's *Code of Discipline* stipulates that suspension should be used only as a last resort.

Table 4 charts the distribution of McKinley suspensions by grounds for suspensions, including multiple suspensions, for three years.

Interestingly, while much publicity has focused on weapons or drugs in schools, few McKinley students are suspended for such offenses. Other offenses include damaging or stealing property and refusing to leave a part of the school building or grounds which is off-limits. These, too, represent a small proportion of reported misbehavior.

The use of suspension on grounds of school or class disruption for McKinley students raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the McKinley program. The outcome of such incidents need not be suspension. Rather than exclude students, school staff could instead review the student's program, reconsidering the strategy used to help students learn new behavior. Suspending children for behavior directly related to their special needs does not accomplish this goal. Indeed, the numbers of suspensions on grounds of disruption is persuasive evidence that the McKinley's program is failing its students. Since behavior resulting in suspensions persists within a school context which is, in theory, designed to help students re-learn such behavior, these incidents indicate that the context is failing to engage students and should be changed.

The number of suspensions on grounds of disruption is persuasive evidence that the McKinley's program is failing its students. Since behavior resulting in suspensions persists within a school context which is, in theory, designed to help students re-learn such behavior, these incidents indicate that the context is failing to engage students and should be changed.

Table 4: Students Suspended At Least Once by Category

TOTAL		CATEGORY*					Other
		Endangers Physical Safety (7.4)	School or Class Disruption (7.8)	Causes Physical Injury (7.1)	Possession of Weapon (7.5)	Possession of Drugs (7.6)	
1982-83	34	32	21	3	1	0	7
1983-84	44	31	44	0	4	0	6
1984-85	57	20	49	6	2	0	6

*Some students are counted in several categories.

MASSACHUSETTS GUIDELINES FOR DISCIPLINING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The Massachusetts Department of Education, educators, parents, and advocates for students have long wrestled with the problem of disciplining students with special needs when students' misbehavior is the result of their handicapping condition. While recognizing a school's need to maintain an orderly school climate, the Department of Education is also responsible for assuring that students with special needs are not denied access to educational services promised in an Individualized Educational Plan (I.E.P.) because of suspension.

Consequently, according to the *Policy on Disciplining Students with Special Needs* approved by the State Board of Education and in effect as of January 1986, I.E.P.s should explicitly describe "appropriate programs and strategies for addressing potentially disruptive behavior." The *Policy* further states, "Continuation of these behaviors may indicate that the student's need are not being met and a new I.E.P. may need to be developed." Moreover, the *Policy* specifically refers to the example of children with emotional problems leading to acting out behavior as the students most likely to need protections against undue suspension. Under the *Policy*, the definition of suspension includes in-school suspension or any action "which results in the removal of a student from the program which is prescribed in his/her Individualized Educational Plan."

At the core of the *Policy* is the belief that suspension of any student is not sound educational practice and should be used only as a last resort. Moreover, the insistence that behavior management strategies be written into the I.E.P. affirms a concept basic to special education: that because each child will respond differently to different approaches, the strategy to address acting out behavior should be tailor-made to fit the individual student's needs. Finally, the *Policy* clarifies that it is the I.E.P., not the student, that has failed and needs changing when student behaviors continue. These concepts are well-grounded in good educational practice.

Statistics on this report were collected prior to approval of the state's *Policy on Disciplining Students with Special Needs*. Now that the *Policy* is in place, it is the responsibility of the McKinley's administration to review the I.E.P.'s of all students who may be suspended for ten or more days in a school year to determine whether students misconduct is related to a student's disability. When a special education TEAM decides that such a relationship does exist, the TEAM must redesign the student's program. At the McKinley, it appears that a substantial number of students would benefit from such reviews.

IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION: EXCLUSION IN THE NAME OF THERAPY?

In special education, it is rare for any two children, let alone 80, to respond equally to the same disciplinary program. Adherence to a strict protocol in which a system of negative consequences so dominates the system risks the loss of attention to individual student differences.

According to the state's *Policy*, suspension is defined as "any action which results in the removal of a student from the program which is prescribed in his/her Individualized Educational Plan." This definition includes in-school suspension and exclusion from school transportation. The inclusion of in-school suspension has special relevance to the McKinley's program.

The McKinley Middle School has based most of its program on a behavior management system which places students, if not on out-of-school suspension, in in-school suspension or in a "Planning Center" within the school.

Within the context of this *Policy*, the McKinley's in-school discipline procedures which remove students from their classrooms may be prescribed in the I.E.P. When removal is called "therapeutic dismissal," school staff can create the illusion that the removal is "for the child's own good." Such a claim is debatable. In fact, this removal results in individual students' failing to benefit from an academic program and creates disruption for all students as students move in and out of the classroom for disciplinary reasons and are sent to "planning" sessions or in-school suspension.

The McKinley's behavior management system relies on a set of "consequences" to control the behavior of students attending the school. Staff at the school maintain a summary sheet for each student, listing the consequences of students' negative classroom behaviors. Consequences can include detention, an in-school suspension program, or time in the school's Planning Center. Students who are sent to the Center for "planning time" are asked to think about their behavior for fifteen minute periods, to assess why it was inappropriate and to produce alternative behavior. Students referred to the Planning Center are given the option of attending. However, if they do not attend, they are detained after school. While school staff do not consider referral to the Planning Center to be punitive, students are likely to experience it as punishment.

At the McKinley, truancy and tardiness can also result in students spending hours in detention. Each unexcused absence, for example, requires three hours of detention, time which can become overwhelming even when students are given the option of making up detention time during lunch or in-school suspension. Failure to make up three or more hours in detention per semester results in automatic failure (Testimony of Marvin Mitchell, Assistant Program Director, McKinley Middle School, BSEA² hearing, February 2, 1986). As a result of the McKinley's detention policy, some children may actually arrive in school and go directly to in-school suspension. From the students' point of view this must seem like a punishment for coming to school. Indeed, the entire system of consequences can result in substantial amounts of time out of

Because many McKinley students fit the profile of students most likely to drop out of school, we would expect the McKinley to look something like an alternative school. However, if anything, the McKinley's program is more rather than less like the schools which have already failed these students. For this reason, the dynamic between the school's push-out policies and students' feelings that "school is not for me" is likely to be more rather than less intense.

the classroom. During the 1984-85 school year, for example, one student spent over 40 hours in the Planning Center and 3,000 minutes in detention (Testimony of Elizabeth Knowles, Teacher, McKinley Middle School, BSEA hearing, February 2, 1986). At best, this policy seems counter-productive; at worst, it is likely to sever the tenuous bonds fragile students already have with their school.

The commitment of the McKinley's staff to this rigid behavior management system is cause for concern. In special education, it is rare for any two children, let alone 80, to respond equally to the same disciplinary program. Adherence to a strict protocol in which a system of negative consequences so dominates the system risks the loss of attention to individual student differences.

The costs of the overuse of exclusionary measures to students' self-esteem, that crucial need for middle school students, are hard to measure but real. The fact that this system is the core of a segregated school where students do not have opportunities for social interaction with their peers increases the chances for harmful effects on students' self-image. Commenting on the McKinley's program, Kay Walsh, Community Representing for the Bay-side Council for Children, remarked that such a system may work well for students who have good internal strengths and who need the structure and challenge of standards and sanctions. However, students who have few internal strengths and many emotional needs will not respond well to reflexive, non-individualized

2. Bureau of Special Education Appeals, Massachusetts Department of Education.

sanctions. Instead they are increasingly vulnerable to both emotional and behavioral disintegration. Moreover, even when students' needs call for clearly outlined structure, implementation involving any one student's spending 40 hours in a Planning Center begs for review of the program.

The McKinley Middle School's policies seem to emphasize control of students at the expense of meeting students' academic and developmental needs. The amount of time some students spend in detention and the Planning Center leaves little time left for academic work. The emphasis on structure and limits which is appropriate for middle grades students is not balanced by programmatic commitment to meeting the developmental needs of students for a meaningful role in their school and community, for positive interaction with peers or adult role models, or for the chance to explore a diversity of interests.

Boston does have a number of alternative schools whose characteristics make them successful model alternatives to the McKinley Middle School. The Log School, the Little House Alternative School, Edco Youth Alternative, the Dorchester Youth Collaborative, and

CONCLUSION

The McKinley's suspension statistics raise doubts that the supposed advantages of placement of students with special needs in a segregated setting outweigh the disadvantages. The school's suspension record is not persuasive in showing that the McKinley is successful with the majority of its students, either in helping them learn new behaviors or

the Holden School share the teacher and student cultures, the family-like climate, the individualized instruction and curriculum, and the experiential internships that make alternatives work for high-risk students (Fine, 1981; Foley, 1984; Wehlage, 1983). Many students at these schools, like McKinley students, have longstanding disciplinary problems. Unlike the McKinley, however, these schools suspend students infrequently. As a result, they are more likely to re-engage alienated students and renew their interest in their education. The McKinley could benefit from these models by incorporating features of their approach into the McKinley's program.

Because many McKinley students fit the profile of students most likely to drop out of school we would expect the McKinley to look something like an alternative school. However, if anything, the McKinley's program is *more* rather than less like the schools which have already failed these students. For this reason, the dynamic between the school's push-out policies and students' feelings that "school is not for me" is likely to be *more* rather than less intense. Sadly, the McKinley School is missing the opportunity to be a real alternative for vulnerable youngsters.

in promoting the commitment to education that is necessary to prevent dropping out. The long-range harm to students is likely to be go unnoticed until students reach the age when they can officially withdraw from school. At that point, it is clear that while the school may have failed, the students are the losers.

Middle School Reform: There Is a Way, But Is There the Will?

Boston's official dropout rate has reached 43%. Some school officials attribute the increase in Boston's school dropout figures, up from 36% in 1982, to an increase in the percentage of minority students in the school system or to the poverty or social problems of these students' families. In fact, when asked to explain the rise in the dropout rate, some school decision-makers and some staff cite student characteristics as the cause of school disengagement. When school officials identify "project kids," "refugee kids," or "problem families" as if students' backgrounds were the cause of students' dropping out, they imply that schools can make little difference to student educational achievement because students and their families do not value education. This is simply not the case. As one Boston parent has said, "Education is the only legal alternative to poverty" (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1984).

In fact, urban schools *can* teach all children. A large body of research on effective schools for poor and minority children now contradicts any assumption about poverty and race as causes of student underachievement in schools. In effective schools, poor and minority

Taken together, the findings of school effectiveness research stress over and over the important message that schools do make a difference. Indeed, schools can no longer place blame for student failure anywhere but inside the school. When school-based reforms are introduced to benefit poor and minority students, all students will benefit and the school's overall holding power will improve.

students in urban centers are learning. With no more resources than other schools, with the same bureaucratic constraints, and with a student population as poor as other schools in their district, effective schools teach basic skills within an orderly and caring climate. Educators can no longer say "these children can't learn."

By now, the overall characteristics and specific routines of effective schools where all children learn are well-known (Edmonds, 1979, 1982, 1984; Sizemore, 1983, 1985). These characteristics can be summarized as follows:

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

1. Effective schools have a strong sense of mission with an instructional focus emphasizing basic skills.

Learners experiencing difficulty receive reinforcement and extra help, requiring teachers to use available time creatively to reinforce basic skills. Within classrooms, students with problems are taken first for instruction, and within schools, needier students are assigned the most, not the least, experienced teachers. Moreover, teachers in effective schools use preparation and in-service time to tutor or provide small group instruction for students who need extra help. Finally, instruction includes curriculum that acknowledges the real life experiences of poor and minority students.

2. An orderly and pleasant climate characterizes effective schools.

Both the school and individual classrooms rely on flexible but highly structured routines which are moderated by affection and consideration. Inexperienced teachers with poor classroom management skills are supported and corrected by the principal who deals with severe discipline problems. Effective schools have established routines to resolve discipline cases and handle rule violators in a fair, firm, and consistent way, and students know that referral to the principal's office means additional work assigned rather than time off from classwork.

3. The school principal is a strong instructional and administrative leader.

Such principals work closely with teachers to monitor student progress and build consensus for high achievement. They interact frequently with students, assuming some control for student discipline and coordination of parent involvement. They supervise school offices which are observably places where school business is coordinated, and they are willing to disagree with the superintendent when Central Office requirements contradict the school's commitment to student achievement, consciously recognizing that in doing so they jeopardize their chances for promotion in the school system. They receive information about what goes on in their school first, not last.

4. Effective schools base everything they do on the assumption that all children can achieve.

This assumption is the basis for high expectations for every student in the school regardless of family background. Consequently, in these schools, teachers feel they can have an impact on educational achievement. Teachers in these schools do not say that certain students can not learn. While they may know that poverty correlates with low school achievement, they

conclude that it is the failure of the school to respond to family background and poor children which contributes to under-achievement. One result of high teacher expectations for students is delay in referrals for special education evaluations until school staff are certain all other in-class alternatives have been tried.

5. Effective schools perform careful and frequent evaluation of student progress.

Student work is evaluated quickly, and students receive immediate feedback, correction, and reteaching. Testing is used to diagnose learning problems, and principals work closely with teachers to adapt teaching methods to improve student achievement.

Taken together, the findings of school effectiveness research stress over and over the important message that schools do make a difference. The implicit and explicit conclusions of this research suggest two additional points. First, individual schools can be held accountable for the progress of *all* students in those schools. Indeed, schools can no longer place blame for student failure anywhere but inside the school. Second, when school-based reforms are introduced to benefit poor and minority students, all students will benefit and the school's overall holding power will improve.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS AS EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

While most research on effective schools has been based on observations of elementary schools, recent research attention to middle schools has taken similar turns. Moreover, practitioners have begun to act on research findings related to middle schools. In 1985, the National Association of Secondary School Principals called for reforms in middle grade education. NASSP's *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* focused on core values of the middle school, school climate and culture, student development, curriculum, instruction, school organization, the use of technology, teachers, transition from elementary and to high schools, principals, and the relationship of the school to community resources. Many of NASSP's recommendations conform to the findings of effective schools research.

Where NASSP's agenda breaks new ground, however, is in an additional recommendation that middle schools be "client-centered" in their attention to the unique needs of young adolescents attending these schools. This emphasis adds a new dimension to thinking about middle schools. Put another way, this recommendation means that, successful middle schools must expand their mission to account for the special, age-identified developmental needs of students ages 11-15. The National Middle School Association has also consistently stressed the importance of designing school structures, practices, and policies to account for the developmental needs of this age group (NMSA, 1985).

In addition, the Center for Early Adolescence in North Carolina has documented the existence of successful middle schools nationwide, identifying the characteristics of schools

where all students are learning. Their school portraits include detailed descriptions of urban schools where poor and minority students are achieving. Moreover, at these schools, attendance is high and suspension infrequent (Lipsitz, 1984). As evidence that middle schools can work well for urban, poor children, Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. has also described individual middle schools in New York City which are effectively teaching low income students (Fruchter, 1986). These schools set standards of excellence which all middle schools anywhere can meet.

According to researcher Joan Lipsitz, author of *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, which highlights in detail the routines of four schools, "the most striking feature of the four [successful] schools is their willingness and ability to adapt all school practices to the individual differences in intellectual, biological, and social maturation of their students." She concludes that effective schools at the middle level will consciously design organizational structures which match, rather than fight against, the developmental needs of students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Indeed, Lipsitz, the National Middle School Association, and NASSP persuasively argue that the relationship between human development and learning in the middle grades must be mutually enhancing and that middle schools must be organized so as to promote that relationship for young adolescents.

In effective middle schools, client-centeredness begins with an understanding of early adolescence as a developmental stage in its own right. The most unique feature of this developmental stage is the intensity and pace of physical, intellectual, and emotional change which students of this age experience. In fact, as human beings we experience greater leaps of growth and development between ages 11 and 14 than between any other three year period after age three. (Dorman, 1984.) Moreover, students experience such changes according to their own individualized calendars. Teachers and parents, often exhausted from keeping up with these changes, are well-aware of the challenge these changes pose in maintaining positive relationships with young people during this time.



PHOTO: LESLIE STAROBIN

In effective middle schools, client-centeredness begins with an understanding of early adolescence as a developmental stage in its own right. The most unique feature of this developmental stage is the intensity and pace of physical, intellectual, and emotional change which students of this age experience...Middle schoolers are "11 going on 21," a reality which often leaves both young people and the adults who work with them equally confused.

Middle schoolers are "11 going on 21," a reality which often leaves both young people and the adults who work with them equally confused. During this stage, teachers and parents alike, aware of youthful strivings toward adulthood, are fond of reminding young adolescents to "act your age," or pointing out "you're not a baby anymore." But this very see-sawing from childhood to maturity is the core characteristic of this age group.

- Sam wears a new shirt and carries a briefcase to his first day in middle school. Looking very serious and grown-up, his first question to his teacher is "When's recess?"
- Gina gets off the middle school bus, eye make-up perfect, hair styled to mimic an Olympic figure skating gold medalist, dressed to kill. Only her red lollipop betrays the fact she is not 18.
- Donald and Jerome are prepared for the seventh grade field trip overnight to Cape Cod. The day before leaving they ask if they can bring their stuffed toys with them.
- Leora masters the eighth grade writing assignment to compose a holiday letter to her overseas pen-pal. More than anything, she reports, she wants large pierced hoop earrings and a Snoopy doll for Christmas.
- In September, Mrs. Johnson places Zaida and Patrice in the same activity group because she sees they work well together. By November, the two seventh graders are not speaking to each other.
- Mr. Sanders is used to asking his sixth graders what they thought of the TV show he knows they watch on Friday nights. But this Monday, the students seem not to know what he is talking about. "That's baby stuff," says Robert of the program he loved only last week. All the others agree.

When students are at the brink of adolescence, when they are partly still children but beginning to taste independence, they need experiences which take both parts of themselves into account. Schools which teach young adolescents effectively keep these changes and seven normal developmental needs of young adolescents in mind in designing every aspect of their school program (Dorman, 1984; Lipsitz, 1984). These key needs are as follows:

1. The need for structure and clear limits

Clear, caring, consistent communication with adults in charge of learning helps students know who they are in a world that seems increasingly full of uncertainties.

2. The need for competence and achievement

Every student needs the opportunity to succeed in some way in school and to receive rewards for success. Feelings of self-worth are essential to becoming a productive adult and moving on to higher levels of competence.

3. The need for diversity

The chance to try out new things encourages students to develop curiosity about a world outside family and school and keeps them engaged in school.

4. The need for opportunities for self-exploration and self-definition

Such opportunities help answer the most pressing questions of adolescence including "Who am I?" and "Am I normal?"

5. The need for positive social interaction with adults and other students

Positive adult role models can raise expectations and aspirations while peer interaction promotes skills in living in a democratic community and satisfies students' need for social activity.

6. The need for meaningful participation in school and community

The chance for all students to feel they belong enhances a sense of security while opportunities to contribute to others foster a growing sense of altruism and idealism.

7. The need for physical activity

The chance for students to express extra energy is a way of relieving the tensions and pressures of moving from childhood into adolescence while learning to cope with a maturing, developing body.

Developing effective middle schools requires establishing shared consensus in the school community that meeting these needs is of central importance. Thus, while the organizational features that evolve in middle schools will conform to some characteristics of effective elementary schools, differences will also emerge. For example, structure and limit-setting in elementary schools will largely come about through principal and teacher decisions. In effective middle schools, however, structures adapt to the evolving independence of young adolescents who are in transition

from childhood to adolescence. At the middle school level, the need for competence and achievement must address mastery of basic skills, but teaching approaches must be sensitive to young adolescents' impatience with materials or activities that are too "babyish" and that do not challenge the eagerness of this age group to try out new experiences. While direct instruction remains essential, teaching techniques must also respond to needs for continuity of relationships and security within the peer group and community.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR REAL MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Like effective schools research, middle schools research emphasizes the message that successful middle schools are places where all students can learn academically. In practice, successful middle schools broaden the definition of effectiveness to account for the developmental needs of the students. While test scores continue to serve as indicators of student progress, by themselves they offer only a partial picture of school effectiveness. Middle schools which both teach academic skills to young adolescents and encourage the social development of students on the road toward adulthood can be called successful.

Support for middle schools that conform to this definition of successful middle schools does, in fact, exist in Boston. Asked to list five characteristics defining a good middle school in Boston, parents, human service professionals, business representatives, and educators surveyed by the Center affirmed the view that middle schools should attend to what Barbara Dane of the New England League of Middle Schools describes as "the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth of the 'total child'." Peg Moloney, a parent of Boston school students and once staff to former Boston School Committee member Jean Sullivan McKeigue, put this notion another way, asserting that schools should emphasize a "recognition of tremendous changes that students are experiencing as they enter adolescence." Another parent, Bettie Feruzi, formerly Acting Director of the Citywide Parents Council, also urged a "comprehensive approach geared to the developmental characteristics of middle school students."

To parents and professionals alike, it is clear that curriculum, staff, and teaching approaches in middle schools should all reflect this commitment to adolescent development. Anne Larkin, member of the Massachusetts Board of Education and Assistant Professor at Lesley College, emphasizes that the principal in a good middle school "has an understanding of middle school philosophy and middle school children." Ellen Guiney, Director of Boston's Citywide Education Coalition and a member of the Massachusetts Board of Regents, takes this characteristic a step further. In her view, a good middle school has "teachers who wish to be with this age student and who develop personal connections with the students." Indeed, one expert in adolescent development, John Butler, formerly of Boston Children's Hospital, stressed that such qualities should extend to all adults in the school. As he says, "One implication of these criteria is that the *extended* staff of the school must be large, including aides and other community members as well as teachers. A high ratio of caring adults to children is more important than a high teacher/student ratio."

Given this, not surprisingly, many concerned parents and professionals in Boston also emphasize that good counseling and human services staff should be available to middle school students. Moreover, many surveyed also want a curriculum that reflects a sensitivity to adolescent development. Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith of Boston City Hospital says a good middle school "teaches frankly and continually issues of growth and development."

Parents Isalah George of the Citywide Parents Council and Peg Moloney emphasize the need for an "exploratory" and "well-rounded" curriculum including academics, arts, physical education for all students and, in Isalah George's words, "an opportunity [for children] to see the world around them and the many career choices available to them." Dana Wade, Coordinator of Corporate Contributions for John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, adds that good middle schools should offer "innovative programs that teach proper self-esteem, racial harmony, and a desire for learning." Several others surveyed emphasized the desirability of a curriculum that addressed student needs for diversity and self-exploration. Dr. Prothrow-Stith, for example, says that a good middle school "teaches how to make choices and not always follow the crowd." Karen Kane, middle grades educator and former consultant to the Boston Student Human Services Collaborative, suggests weekly, elective activity periods, small group discussions, and values clarification courses.

WHAT THE EXPERTS PROPOSE

In fact, perhaps the most important cognitive characteristic educators underscore about middle grade students is that young adolescents are not confined to one reasoning stage but instead move with unnerving inconsistency back and forth, thinking very literally one minute and with increasing abstract abilities the next. Indeed, in their thinking as in their social development, students are in a transitional stage. Some students think in concrete terms all of the time. Others use concrete reasoning some of the time and abstract reasoning at other times. It is this transitional stage that is confusing and frustrating for teachers. As Julia Thomason, nationally known middle grades educator has pointed out, "Periodic indications of formal thought may make teachers certain the transition is complete. When this is not the case, students may be accused of not trying and will develop a sense of failure or increasing anxiety."

The implication of this transitional stage, however, should not be lost in the confusion. Again quoting Julia Thomason, "teaching all students to THINK is a basic skill, and efforts to achieve it must be on-going across the curri-

No one surveyed believed that academic learning should be sacrificed to developing social skills. In fact, Stephen Driscoll, now principal of the Buker Middle School in Wenham and formerly Director of the New Horizons alternative at the King Middle School, says, "Philosophically, an effective middle school should have as a basic and uncompromising presumption that all kids can and will learn." Others identified a need for attention to basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. The teaching of skills to enable students to go on to the next learning levels and to prepare students for high school is seen as the clear mandate for middle schools. However, community leaders, parents, and professionals also understand that techniques and curriculum designed to teach basic skills must be appropriate for young adolescents, respond to multiple learning styles, and adapt to the varying changes and levels of concrete and abstract reasoning typical of this age group.

culum." Moreover, while students may be concrete thinkers when they enter middle school, they need to be brought to the point of being able to think more abstractly by the time they leave. Good teaching which stimulates but does not assume abstract thinking in middle school is the key to this transition.

Another source of confusion is inherent in the diversity of intellectual abilities of young adolescents. In fact, the simple description of a student as a "seventh grader" tells little about the range of that student's abilities. Young adolescents represent a wide range of skill development, so attention to basic skills can not end in the elementary years. However, appropriate learning experiences to refine skills must take into account the greater variety of learning levels and styles that reflect the diversity of the age group. When students perceive learning activities as too "babyish," they will quickly lose interest and tune out of their schooling.

Taken together, new stages in intellectual development coupled with emerging needs for social development and growth for young

adolescents have specific implications for the organization of middle schools. Organizational structures and practices which allow for teaching that complements rather than clashes with the cognitive and developmental characteristics of this age group are hallmarks

• Interdisciplinary Teams

According to middle schools educator Dr. Paul George of the University of Florida, "Certain programs, when present, strengthen everything else in the school. In middle schools, it's whatever gives you smallness within bigness."¹ Dr. George's point is that the way in which people are organized to work together is the key feature of an exemplary middle school. Interdisciplinary teams may be called "clusters," "houses," or "schools-within-schools," but their purposes do not change: to reduce the distance between students and teachers, to enhance familiarity and a sense of community within the school, and to integrate subject areas into a cohesive instructional approach.

When such a school organization is in place, students are much more likely to feel that they have a place in the school, that they are known by name, and that at least one adult cares about them. Moreover, they do not have to gauge their behavior and interactions to seven separate teachers with seven sets of rules as they change from class to class, but to one team of teachers who share one set of rules and expectations. From the teachers' perspective, the benefits are similar. Teachers benefit from collegiality with their peers and from the opportunity to share problems and perspectives of students with others.

When the interdisciplinary team is assigned the same group of students over the three year middle school tenure, the relationship between teachers and students improves markedly and the team will work even better. Arguing that "human beings, especially teachers and learners, were not meant to be cut off from each other every nine months," Dr. George advocates multi-age groupings within the team, a situation which allows for peer teaching and monitoring of individual student progress and reduces the stigma of students who

of good middle schools. These practices also enhance schools' holding power for young people at risk of dropping out. Some of the practices most commonly found in middle schools which adapt their structures to the needs of their students include the following:

are older than their classmates. He cautions that every team, cluster, or school-within-a-school should be as much like any other team in the school as possible. Teaming, in other words, should not result in tracking by another name.

Interdisciplinary teams may be called "clusters," "houses," or "schools-within-schools," but their purposes do not change: to reduce the distance between students and teachers, to enhance familiarity and a sense of community within the school, and to integrate subject areas into a cohesive instructional approach.

According to Dr. George, current research indicates that the longer teachers and students are together, the more effective the education. He points out that the move from a departmentalized structure to a team structure does mean trading a multitude of perspectives for permanent, committed relationships but that such arrangements more closely meet young adolescents' developmental needs for structure and positive interaction with adults and other students. When an advisor-advisee program is added to the team, George reports, the team works even better. Researcher Joan Lipsitz confirms that such organizational practice can have a ripple effect for the entire school. In the effective schools she observed, one characteristic of the school climate where such organizational arrangements were in place was the feeling and appearance of fewer students in the school than might be expected from enrollment figures. In this way, interdisciplinary teams not only contribute directly to students' learning but also strengthen the conditions of an orderly school climate which allows learning to continue.

1. Comments by Dr. George were made at the annual conference of the New England League of Middle Schools, March 24-25, 1986.

• Exploratory Interdisciplinary Curriculum

In real middle schools that are responsive to the realities of their young adolescent students, the curriculum will look different from that of elementary schools, even when the attention is still focused on basic needs. The difference rests on the attention paid to the developmental needs of students, particularly needs for competence, diversity, opportunities for self-definition and participation in the community, and positive interaction with peers and adults.

For example, because twelve and thirteen year olds are different from each other (and individually different from day to day!) in their learning styles and paces, curriculum in real middle schools depends on a wide variety of teaching approaches which stress learning by doing, demonstration, individual assignments, and small work groups in addition to lectures.

Young adolescents are by nature often more interested in their immediate social surroundings and the peer relationships in the classroom than in learning square roots or perfecting long division. A developmentally responsive curriculum harnesses these social concerns by assigning cooperative tasks to small groups so that interaction is a necessity for rather than a distraction from learning.



PHOTO: LESLIE STAROBIN

Because reasoning ability for this age group is still largely concrete, learning activities often rely on real life-oriented problem solving tasks. Teachers demonstrate rather than lecture and stretch students' minds with "What if...?" and "How do you know...?" questions that coax them into thinking more abstractly. Moreover, because young adolescents are beginning to test out their place in the community, learning activities may also take youngsters into the school neighborhood on projects that allow them to form relationships with others—with pre-schoolers at a local day care center or elderly in a nursing home—and help them reflect on and understand their surroundings.

Young adolescents, much to the dismay of teachers whose earlier experience was in high school and who expect to take charge of a class of attentive students seated in rows, are by nature often more interested in their immediate social surroundings and the peer relationships in the classroom than in learning square roots or perfecting long division. A developmentally responsive curriculum harnesses these social concerns by assigning cooperative tasks to small groups so that interaction is a necessity for rather than a distraction from learning. Such assignments also involve peer tutoring and self-evaluation in small groups, activities which foster both teamwork and self-exploration.

An interdisciplinary curriculum is a logical outgrowth of the implementation of an interdisciplinary team. Such a curriculum works to integrate teaching of all subjects—reading, math, science, and social studies—and so gives substantive focus for students. Such a curriculum has an additional advantage of allowing enough flexibility to involve students with a variety of learning styles, including students with special needs. Within the framework of this curriculum, the interdisciplinary team can maximize its potential for all students.

For many "real" middle schools, the hallmark of the curriculum is a time period, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly, for high interest mini-courses. Such courses are designed to engage students' capacity for intense involvement in a subject or interest while acknowledging that such involvement, given students'

developmental stage, will last only a short time. Just as young adolescents who are testing independence are trying out new roles, hairstyles, and dress, they are also trying out a broad range of new interests. However, the commitment they make to these interests at this age is inevitably short term. A curriculum of exploratory courses takes this developmental characteristic into account while encouraging risk-taking and intellectual curiosity and exposing youngsters to a variety of experiences.

Such a curriculum need not sacrifice learning of basic skills. Indeed, basic math and language skills can be reinforced over and over through such mini-courses as "Scrabble," "Equations Tournament," "Trivial Pursuit," "Newspaper," "Mystery History," "Sports Statistics," "Weight Loss Clinic," "Penpals in Other Countries," "Probability and the Lottery," "Journal Writing," or "Making a Quilt." Indeed, if the mission of the school is basic skills improvement, such high interest exploratory courses will reflect this mission. What is different from elementary schools, however, is that students have the opportunity to choose their own vehicle for learning these skills and the chance to change their focus when interest flags, as it inevitably does for this age group.

• Flexible Scheduling

Most citizens think of middle school as a step toward high school, so it seems only natural to move students from one course to another at 45 minute intervals, replicating the traditional high school schedule. Such scheduling, however, is out of step with young adolescents' needs for structure and the opportunity to integrate what they learn in one subject with what they learn in another. John Lounsbury, former president of the National Middle School Association, for example, has called middle school departmentalization an "albatross that prevents students from learning."

With flexible scheduling as the basis for both a fully functioning interdisciplinary team and an exploratory curriculum, teachers can fully take advantage of young adolescents' abilities to make connections between subjects, stimulating them to see one topic from a variety of disciplines. Finally, since flexible scheduling empowers teachers to decide within their teams how to use their time each day, teachers are no longer slaves to a forty-five minute time block.

In addition to student-selected mini-courses, real middle schools offer required exploratory courses as well. Such courses may last only one marking period and may be elected only once. Subjects may include art, music, foreign languages, home economics, business skills, and industrial arts. These courses can provide important opportunities for achievement for students who learn well in different ways or have skills that involve artistic expression, imagination, or using their hands. Introduced at the middle school level, such courses also provide an introduction to course sequences offered at the high school level. Furthermore, they can serve as an exposure to work and different career opportunities. Because successful middle schools offer these courses to all students, they avoid the traps of tracking or the assumed lower status some educators and parents associate with vocational awareness courses. Indeed, the focus on exploring occupational interests through the middle school curriculum is clearly consistent with young adolescents' needs for self-exploration and their inclination to imagine themselves in and try out future roles. The middle school curriculum, consequently, can both heighten students' aspirations for themselves and deepen students' sense of self-worth.

What does such a schedule actually look like? John Lounsbury has presented one model for a flexible schedule that accounts for one long time period during which interdisciplinary academic work is the focus of a team of subject teachers in language arts, math, social studies, and science. During this time, the team can schedule learning activities differently from day to day, taking into account time needed to show a video, discuss it, and write about it all in one day, do a long science experiment, or go on a field trip. Required exploratory courses and physical education classes are allotted shorter daily time blocks, and high interest, student-selected exploratory courses end the day, when student energy for required courses may be low. Homeroom activities begin and end each day. As students get older, electives provide increasing depth. Dr. Lounsbury's model schedule looks like this:

GRADE 6		GRADE 7		GRADE 8
25 min.		HOMEROOM Advisor/Advisee Period—1:20 ratio		
200 min.*	Academic Block— 2 teachers : 60 students	Academic Block— 4 teachers : 120 students ½ time counselor/teacher		Academic Block— 4 teachers : 120 students ½ time counselor/teacher
45 min.		PHYSICAL EDUCATION		
45 min.	Required Exploratory cycle (9 weeks—Art, Music, Home Economics, Industrial Arts)	Required Exploratory Cycle (9 or 12 weeks— Foreign Language, Business, Drama, Art)		Semester Elective
35 min.		High interest mini-courses (M-W-F) Intramurals, schoolwide activities, Clubs, (T-Th)		
10 min.		HOMEROOM Advisor/Advisee Period		

*Includes 35 minutes lunch and 20 minutes passing time.

When middle schools implement flexible scheduling, middle school buildings themselves both look and feel more like elementary schools than high schools. Consequently, parents and other visitors to the school may question whether students' work is "too babyish" or worry that students are having "too much fun." Such is not the case. Students do learn and learn well given this daily schedule. Indeed, the *Boston Globe* of August 17, 1986 reported that in Springfield, Massachusetts, the reading scores of one seventh grader jumped from a second grade to tenth grade level as a result of his experience in such a setting. Moreover, after they become used to this schedule, teachers find that they can teach as well as they have ever taught.

• Guidance Counseling

Like curriculum, teaching approaches, and scheduling, counseling in middle school evolves from normal developmental needs of students in those schools. Consequently, counseling in grades 6–8 works best when it starts with an understanding that middle schoolers are moving from one life stage into another, engaged in the daily "work" of forming a firm self-identity. Their strivings toward becoming young adults have immediate implications for guidance in middle schools.

Middle school counseling must be oriented toward helping all students maneuver through some of the confusion that comes with the turf of early adolescence. As young people try out new roles and respond to the possibilities of their increasing independence in the world outside their family and school, they face an

Still, to counteract such impressions that middle school work is "just baby stuff," outreach to parents and in-service training for teachers are both essential. Preston Shaw, principal of the Shrewsbury Middle School in Massachusetts, for example, holds biannual information sessions for parents with a focus on the goals of middle school education. And Julia Thomason, professor at Appalachian State University in North Carolina and middle school educator, recommends intensive staff training for the first two years of a school's transition to a real middle school to provide teachers with solid background in the ways new school structural arrangements, including scheduling, are developmentally appropriate for young adolescents.

ever widening array of choices in behavior, personal relationships, dress, and interests. Middle school counseling acknowledges this reality and takes seriously the task of helping all students make positive and considered choices in relation to difficult situations they face every day.

Middle school counseling often focuses on group activities. In groups, students can hash out "What if..." situations (and stretch their thinking skills in the process) that present a range of possible choices. Mistakes in judgment are inevitable as students come to grips with their own beliefs, become aware of their actions and the consequences of those actions, and model themselves after a variety of peers and adults in their lives. However, middle grades education treats such mistakes as

opportunities to learn new behavior in a safe situation. The focus of middle school guidance is thus preventive, not crisis-oriented, and educational rather than clinical, so as to allow all students to participate without being labeled as "crazy." Guidance is a means to meet all students' needs for self-exploration and self-definition, not simply to solve the problems of some.

This developmental focus can take different forms. Occupational guidance can take the form of exploring different career fields through field trips to a variety of work settings or conversations with "role models" who visit the school. Such exposure serves to broaden and stimulate personal interests rather than prematurely track students into particular fields. By the same token, exploration of topics such as peer relations, family violence, stereotyping and cross-cultural relations, drug and alcohol use, and human sexuality emphasizes awareness of differences and helps students define their own identities in relation to a wide range of possible attitudes and choices. "What If...?" questions focus on helping students develop judgment to cope with real life situations rather than on crisis counseling. Such guidance activities can be integrated into the curriculum through exploratory courses and, like other courses for this age group, make use of a variety of learning activities. Indeed, one student we interviewed from an alternative school described his appreciation of such an experience. His idea for a perfect school, he said, would include "one class where kids just talk and share stuff with teachers who know how to talk to kids (like about streets and other things they wouldn't normally talk about)."

In many middle schools, such activities, because they are educational rather than clinical, fall within the teaching domain and are scheduled into the school day as mini-courses. In other schools, the schedule also allots a longer homeroom time in the mornings coupled with a shorter time at the end of the day for an advisor-advisee program. The homeroom teacher acts as the advisor to approximately twenty students who are assigned to the same teacher/advisor for their full tenure in the school. Moreover, homeroom teachers have a specific curriculum involving a variety of activities designed to address the developmental concerns of their advisees.

Such an arrangement meets the needs of young adolescents in several ways. First, it reduces the distance of interaction between students and teachers and provides students with on-going attention from one specified adult for the entire time they are enrolled in the school. Such familiarity decreases the chances for interpersonal mistakes that can lead to hostility and trouble in a school by expanding teachers' awareness about individual students' personalities and moods, their strengths, and their needs.

Second, this structure builds into students' schooling a place where they know they belong and where they can share a healthy group experience with their peers. When enough time is provided, both during each day and over several years, homeroom activities can facilitate the development of positive interaction with peers within a familiar structure.



Homeroom time, then, is not for busy work. Rather homeroom is truly a homebase for students, a safe place that enhances students' sense of belonging within a larger, more bureaucratic school community. Such an arrangement has special appeal to a school system such as Boston's which provides only one non-bilingual counselor for every 392 students in middle schools.

Homeroom time, then, is not for busy work, paperwork, or even solely for reading aloud followed by sustained silent reading (much as these reading activities have much to be said for them). Rather homeroom is truly a home-base for students, a safe place that enhances students' sense of belonging within a larger more bureaucratic school community. Such an arrangement has special appeal to a school system such as Boston's which provides only one non-bilingual counselor for every 392 students in middle schools.

This arrangement does not imply that crisis-oriented or problem solving counseling is not also necessary. In the course of educational discussions on such topics as family life or drug use, teachers may become aware that some individual students' difficulties in school are related to problems they encounter outside of school. Middle schools also need to have guidance counselors and systematic, working relationships with outside human service agencies to offer help to students with ongoing problems. These counselors need to be available and accessible on a regular basis and need to have the time and skills to follow through with individual student problems. When these conditions are not met, schools lose key opportunities for engaging vulnerable students. For example, we talked to one student who described how the counselor in his school had helped and talked to him about a disciplinary matter. This student sought out the counselor on two subsequent occasions, reporting, "I looked for him in his office and all over, but I could never find him."

Nor does an advisor-advisee approach imply that attention to social needs of students should replace a focus on the academic mission of the school. Obviously schools must teach skills in math and language and in creative thinking and problem solving. However, educators are finding more and more that students will not learn basic skills if they feel no one in the school cares about them, if they feel lost or invisible in a large bureaucracy, or if they are distracted by needs to check out what other students are wearing or by concerns about who they will sit with at lunch.

Teachers' working with these needs rather than pretending they don't exist can free up students' attention for learning.

Clearly, it is the teachers in middle schools who make real the potential of a guidance approach that is fully integrated into the curriculum. As Joe Carpineto, Director of the Log School, an alternative middle school in Boston, asserts, "Middle school students are the best psychologists you'll ever meet. They can check you out in a minute and tell whether you're real or not. If you're not, they don't care what you have to teach them." All middle school staff must be caring, available, and clear about their own identities, constantly checking for inconsistencies between what they say and what they do. Self-awareness on the part of teachers enhances communication with students who can be increasingly certain that the adults around them will follow through on their promises to them. Commitment to students' development requires that teachers demonstrate their caring about students from the minute students walk in the door to the time they leave. Teachers must be able to listen with a third ear, looking beyond their students' behavior to ways in which that behavior is expressing fundamental developmental needs of young adolescents.

Does this view of middle schools ask too much of our educators? We think not. Indeed, we believe that just as high expectations for students enhance student performance, high expectations for our schools can nurture improvements in school performance. Furthermore, we believe that the knowledge exists to transform our underachieving middle schools into middle schools that teach all students basic skills while also addressing basic developmental issues. Because of a variety of unique organizational characteristics, the middle school model has the potential to increase attendance, improve achievement, and reduce suspension. If middle school reform can happen elsewhere, it can happen here.

Promising Practices in Boston Middle Schools

HOPE FOR CHANGE IN BOSTON

From the beginning of this project, we have assumed that solutions to problems identified in middle schools would be found in Boston Schools themselves. As part of this study we have attempted to identify promising practices, policies, and programs which schools themselves have designed to meet the needs of middle school students at risk. We do so in the belief that the seeds of change lie in "home-grown" solutions that evolve from the real experiences of teachers, principals, and support staff who work in the schools under all the constraints imposed by a bureaucratic urban school system. In identifying promising practices, we also affirm the belief that improving the educational experience for students at risk can enrich the education of all students in the middle school.

Good programs do not make good schools. Indeed, schools may offer a range of add-on programs but at the same time show poor attendance, suspension, or promotion profiles. Moreover, good programs do not always have enough resources to include all students who could benefit from the program. When this happens, schools may be tempted to "triage" or "cream" students, selecting only those students for services who can obviously succeed and restricting access to students who are perceived to be more difficult to teach. The school-based nature of some programs, while for the most part a strength, may further limit access; students who could benefit from certain programs may attend schools which do not offer the services that could help them. Such students who could be helped if they attended one school must go without because they attend another.

Successful middle schools are schools which acknowledge the rapid and irregular biological, psychological, intellectual, and social changes of their young adolescent students. Such schools design curriculum, instruction, school organization, and governance to account for these changes and to meet the developmental needs of this age group.

By the same token, the practices and programs which hold out promise for students at risk in middle schools *begin* with a recognition of the developmental needs of these young people. The curriculum, program design, and



PHOTO: PHIL SPRING

Some promising programs are corrective or remedial in the sense that they are designed to help students at the point when they are already at risk of dropping out. These assume that the focus of intervention is the individual student. Others are preventive and structural, designed to enhance the educational experience for all students and eliminate school-based practices that put students at risk.

teaching approach in such programs are likely to reflect an acknowledgment of these needs and a commitment to meeting them. To the extent that they successfully engage the most vulnerable students—those students enrolled below their age-appropriate grade, students with erratic attendance, and students with records of multiple suspensions—these programs have implications for school-based reform in the middle grades. In fact, one test for success of a program is that its lessons are extended and applied to the entire school.

Some promising programs are corrective or remedial in the sense that they are designed to help students at the point when they are already at risk of dropping out. These assume that the focus of intervention is the individual student. Others are preventive and structural, designed to enhance the educational experience for all students and eliminate school-based practices that put students at risk. Such programs adopt a school improvement strategy, assuming that the purpose of intervention is to make change in the school's structure or routine. Some have elements of both approaches. Given the large number of students already at risk in Boston middle schools, and given

strong evidence that existing policies, practices, and structural arrangements are putting students at risk, both approaches are necessary. In the long run, the measure of success of both will be a reduction in the dropout rate and an increase in students attending 85% or more of the time, a decrease in numbers of students suspended, and improved student achievement for all students in all middle grades. Until the long-term effects can be assessed, we hold out hope that the programs and practices described can begin to re-engage students in their learning and make changes which will prevent both the symptoms and causes of school disengagement.

RECAP

RECAP does not do things halfway. Since students at risk experience attendance problems, are frequently suspended from school, and tend to be enrolled below their age-appropriate grade, RECAP believes that dropout prevention consists of addressing the needs of its students in all these areas, not

simply one or another. The result is a student-centered dropout prevention program for middle school students of which Boston can be proud.

RECAP was the brainchild of Philip Dushku when he was a teacher at the Dearborn School in 1978. Now RECAP is in its eighth year and operating in 13 middle schools and four alternative programs. Phil Dushku is the program's director. In its eight years, RECAP has been cited as a model dropout prevention program by the Massachusetts Department of Education's Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity and Washington's Institute for Policy Studies. It has also been profiled locally by Channel 7 and WBZ-TV and nationally by "Sixty Minutes." In Boston's neighborhoods, youth workers name it as the most positive effort made by middle schools to engage students at risk in their education.

Students in RECAP are the students in middle schools who some educators say are hardest to reach. Most have a history of attendance and disciplinary problems. All have repeated at least one grade and some are up to four years behind their age-appropriate grade. All lack enough credits to move out of their grade, not, staff say, because they are not able to do their assignments but because their disengagement from school keeps them from completing their work. These are among the most alienated students in middle schools who, without special efforts on the part of the school, are likely to drop out before graduating.



PHOTO: ELLEN SHUB

This community service requirement is built into students' contracts as a condition for double promotion and is a provision which meets crucial developmental needs of this age group. Students' self-esteem improves visibly because of their involvement in activities where they contribute to others.

As a condition for participating in RECAP, students and their parents must sign an individual behavioral contract. This contract stipulates that the student will meet all standards for promotion required of other middle grades students: 85% attendance in each quarter, passing grades in all subjects, and appropriate conduct. It is a serious commitment for students who may have been suspended four or five times the previous year and who may be used to "hooking" two or three days a week. In return, students are promised a reward that has real meaning for them: the chance for two grade promotions in one year, once in January and once in June. For many, this means a chance to catch up with their peers; for others it moves them out of their downward spiral of disengagement and directs them toward high school.

While the incentive of a double promotion motivates many students, RECAP staff know that this promise alone will not guarantee success. Consequently, RECAP has put into place a system of support services to help students make changes and re-engage in school. Every school with a RECAP program must free up one staff member, cooperating agency worker, or paid parent liaison for at least the first two and a half hours every morning. Starting work as soon as students gather outside of school, this "youth advocate" checks to see that each RECAP student is attending classes that day. Some students may need an alarm clock, some may need a knock on their door to wake them; the "advocates" do whatever is necessary to get them to school each morning. Advocates also monitor students' academic grades, checking up with students to see that homework is turned in, and in cases where students are in conflict with teachers, RECAP staff act as mediators to resolve a situation before it turns into a crisis. Over the year, as students learn that this adult is someone they can count on, they may turn to RECAP staff for help with personal problems and develop a relationship that can extend beyond their middle school years. Indeed, more than anything else, the key to RECAP's success lies with this one adult who personalizes the contract both students and their parents have with the school, going more than halfway to communicate positive expectations that students can meet the terms of their contracts.

In addition to participating schools' commitment to follow progress of students at risk, most schools work collaboratively with neighborhood human services to offer supplementary support to RECAP students. In some schools, community youth workers offer small group activities where students can share ideas and concerns with other students or learn skills in leadership or multicultural communications. In other schools, youth workers arrange for after-school tutoring or work with students' parents to strengthen supports for students at home. Youth workers in Boston schools attribute their success in these efforts to the principal's willingness to promote school links with the community agency and to an openness on the part of school principal and staff to sharing space, resources, and planning time on behalf of students at risk.

Several unique features make RECAP a dropout prevention program especially suitable for middle school students. First, RECAP operates entirely within the mainstream of the school. In any given school, because no student is pulled out of classes for "special services," students are not stigmatized as "dummies" and avoid the discomfort of being pointed out as "different." By the same token, RECAP students are required to meet standards no different from the standards of the mainstream. While students receive targeted attention, no rules are waived on account of their special status.

Second, RECAP students are selected on the basis of need rather than for their potential to prove the program's success. Some RECAP students are four years behind their age-appropriate grade; some have long histories of school conflict. In general, they are not the students whose attitudes to school have improved with maturation. Rather the combination of their school experiences and emotional disengagement from their schooling makes these students among the most likely to drop out. RECAP intervenes to improve both the objective reality of their school experiences and their subjective perception of this reality before dropout-prone students become totally alienated from school.

Third, RECAP actively involves parents in their contracting process. Parents are informed from the beginning that their children are at risk of dropping out and receive feedback about students' progress throughout the year. The contracting process becomes both an excuse to meet with parents at length and a mechanism for enlisting parents' help in motivating students. Moreover, parents, like their children, get to know at least one adult in the school who can be called to discuss concerns and who can be expected to visit students' homes when necessary. In some schools where youth advocates are also paid parent liaisons, as is the case at the Timilty School, the relationship between the school and parents is further strengthened.

Fourth, the RECAP program includes a strong community service component which provides students with the opportunity for meaningful participation in their neighborhoods. Through collaboration with human service agencies, RECAP arranges for students to earn school credits by working 45-120 hours each year in a variety of non-profit neighborhood-based projects. In these settings students have the chance to interact in a positive way with adults in the world of work and to try out a "grown-up" role under supervision. This community service requirement is built into students' contracts as a condition for double promotion and is a provision which meets crucial developmental needs of this age group. Community workers who supervise students in these settings report that students' self-esteem improves visibly because of their involvement in activities where they contribute to others. In addition, involvement with these agencies in a service capacity can lead to students' seeking services for themselves. For example, one student assigned to work in a community center's gym program last year became familiar with the center's alcohol addiction services. As he got to know the agency better, he approached staff for help for himself and his parents, an effort which resulted in the entire family's receiving counseling.

The success of RECAP is measurable and encouraging. Of the approximately 240 students in the program in the 1984-85 school year, 90% earned at least one promotion, and 40% earned two promotions. Without RECAP, it is likely these students would have failed another grade on top of earlier grades repeated. RECAP's willingness to take a chance on these hard-to-reach students means the difference between students who move ahead in their learning and students who would otherwise be left behind.

RECAP's success in re-engaging middle school students at risk recommends its expansion. Currently only approximately 300 students can enroll for its services compared to the vast numbers of students who could benefit—including at least 1800 students who have repeated a grade at least once, and the 1100 enrolled two years or more below age-appropriate grade. At the very least, it should be an available alternative to students in every middle school, not simply for students who happen to be enrolled in one of RECAP's participating schools. It should not be necessary, for example, for a student who has repeated seventh grade twice at one middle school to have to transfer to another school in order to benefit from the structure of the contracting process, the attention of a caring adult, and the incentives of double promotion which allow students to catch up with their age group.

RECAP should also be expanded into elementary schools which can identify students with poor attendance and negative school experiences. Additional staff are also needed to follow students as they enter high school in mid-year, a transitional point that can put even the most successful RECAP students at risk again. From year to year, RECAP students enter up to 15 different high schools, a process which requires renegotiating the terms of mid-year entry for each individual student every year. RECAP's ability to hold onto vulnerable students in the middle grades needs reinforcement at every level of the system from the budget to the assignment process to make full use of its potential. This potential is clear from the remark of a recent RECAP "graduate" who entered high school at mid-year: "I'm really happy now. I'm where I should be. RECAP was definitely a good idea. It gave me a chance to catch up where I messed up."

BOSTON STUDENT HUMAN SERVICES COLLABORATIVE

The Boston Human Services Collaborative is a unique organizational arrangement that provides a vehicle for community-based, city, and state human service agencies to deliver services to students inside Boston's schools, including five middle schools. Under the terms of the Collaborative, each participating school appoints a staff person who convenes a planning committee to assess needs for additional services, develops a plan for delivering these services, and coordinates activities for all external agencies in the school. Participating agencies must sign a Memorandum of Agreement with each school detailing the services which they will provide.

While the Collaborative is only three years old, it has been able to increase available services to students in participating schools significantly. As a result, such state agencies as the Department of Social Services have placed staff in middle schools. Community-based organizations have also supplied staff to lead groups and provide casework for students. Organizations sometimes provide services specifically designed to supplement a school program. Services provided to Curley Middle School students by the Ecumenical Social Action Committee in Jamaica Plain, for example, are designed to expand services available through the school's RECAP program, Project Promote.

The Collaborative itself is neither an arm of the School Department nor an independent, incorporated organization. Its Board of Directors includes School Department staff, including building administrators and teachers, representatives of public and private agencies, parents, and students. It is supported by grants from local foundations and in-kind contributions from the Boston Public Schools.

While the Collaborative has played an important role in making more services available to Boston middle schools, some observers argue that school staff on their own can, if they are familiar enough with the community, bring needed services into the school. By the same token, the Collaborative cannot require schools

to open their doors to outside resources if they do not wish to do so. The Collaborative is most valuable, then, to schools where staff do not have first-hand experience with Boston's available resources and do have an interest in expanding services to their students. The Collaborative, for example, has the potential for matching resources of service groups expert in a particular service area or skilled in serving a particular population whose needs require specialized services; for instance casework for recent immigrant students or consultation to the school community following a crisis such as a suicide or a fire, with schools which need those services.

Equally important is the role the Collaborative can play in planning and coordinating new services and identifying sources of financial support for such services. Planning for school-based clinics, for example, has been a major contribution of the Collaborative toward expanding services to middle school students. Similar planning could result in services to benefit students who are the least well-served in our schools. It could also result in a system-wide training program for school staff on topics relevant to working with young adolescents, including training in group facilitation skills or "counseling for non-counselors." The success of such efforts depends on continued support from school staff who must be open to outside resources and the human services and foundation communities which must continue to mobilize resources to meet existing needs.

Equally important is the role the Collaborative can play in planning and coordinating new services and identifying sources of financial support for such services. Planning for school-based clinics, for example, has been a major contribution of the Collaborative toward expanding services to middle school students. Similar planning could result in services to benefit students who are the least well-served in our schools.

CLUSTER ORGANIZATION IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Clusters are Boston's answer to interdisciplinary teams. They offer an alternative way of organizing middle schools and have distinct advantages for both teachers and students compared to the traditional, departmentalized organization of the mini-high school. At their best, clusters have the potential for engaging students academically while reducing disruptive behavior and suspensions.

Several years ago, Taft School principal Michael Fung matched 60 students identified as the most "troublesome" with his school's most interesting, most concerned, most skilled teachers. Mr. Fung reports that thereafter, teachers could no longer identify 60 such students.

"Clustering" is a way of organizing large, impersonal schools into smaller units. While high schools adhere to a departmental structure organized by subject, clusters bring together a team of one teacher from each subject area to work with a consistent group of students. In schools which have also adopted flexible scheduling, clusters are organized so that the teachers have 115 minutes together. During that time period, each cluster can plan in time blocks that suit the demands of the curriculum. Cluster leaders keep track of the daily schedules, act as a liaison between faculty and administration, and orient new students to their work.

The cluster organization provides significant autonomy for teachers. Teachers, for example, have the power to plan their time in ways that allow for extended learning activities, laboratory experiments, or field trips. Teachers can also come to common consensus on rules that apply to students in their clusters. Obviously, clusters also work best when teachers' styles and approaches to discipline are compatible with each other. Teams of teachers grouped by teaching style can then be matched with students whose learning styles best fit the teachers' approach to the material.

Clusters have advantages for students as well. First, they meet young adolescents' needs for structure and clear limits. Students need to figure out only one set of rules, for example, rather than seven different sets of rules established by seven different teachers. Within this structure, students are also more likely to feel a sense of belonging and an awareness that they will be missed if they are absent. Because cluster classrooms are usually located in one part of the building, students can develop a sense of ownership for specific portions of school space.

Moreover, clusters offer the opportunity for matching students with teachers who are most likely to engage their interest. For example, several years ago, Taft School principal Michael Fung matched 60 students identified as the most "troublesome" with his school's most interesting, most concerned, most skilled teachers. Mr. Fung reports that thereafter, teachers could no longer identify 60 such students. In a similar way, Diana Lam, Mackey School principal, has matched two of the most effective teachers in that school with some of the school's neediest students, a number of whom are over-age for grade and at high risk of dropping out. Such practices make flexible use of clusters, adapting them yearly to the needs of the student population with the school's strongest resources directed toward those students most in need of skilled attention.

In Boston, clusters sometimes include multi-grade groupings, sometimes only a single grade. In some schools, clusters take advantage of block scheduling and interdisciplinary curriculum; in others, they do not. Clusters seem to work best when teachers have a notion of the ways in which such organization can meet the normal developmental needs of middle school students rather than see only the aspects of clustering which allow for greater control of students. When clustering also leads to flexible scheduling and interdisciplinary approaches to learning, student needs are likely to be served well. When clusters become the means to communicate with parents, plan individualized programs for students at risk, and establish goals collaboratively with the principal in each school, all members of the school community—teachers, students, and parents—can benefit.

PROJECT PROMISE

The good news about Project Promise is that it is qualitatively more attractive than it claims to be. When Superintendent Wilson first made his proposal for remedial Saturday classes for middle school students, parents, teachers, and elected school officials either groaned or gasped in disbelief. Parents objected to the program, presented as a blanket dropout prevention approach for all students at the Timilty Middle School, because they believed that not all students needed remediation and that the program as publicized labeled all students in the building as requiring make-up work. Teachers objected to the imposition of additional hours on an already demanding week. School Committee members were skeptical about spending a large amount of state money for what seemed like the same old drill of basic skills.



PHOTO: © 1985 WALTER S. SILVER

At 9:30 on Saturday morning at the Thompson Middle School, 32 students in the school's eighth grade cluster are taking a "talk break." They have spent the first hour of the morning reviewing vocabulary words, synonyms, and analogies they might encounter on standardized tests they will be taking for admission to Boston's exam high schools. Mrs. C., the cluster leader, has given them a break, and it takes her a few minutes to persuade them to settle down again for the morning's activity.

The eight cluster teachers have jointly planned a round of "Mystery History," an educational activity that rolls practice in a variety of academic and social skills into one cooperative learning activity. First, there is silent reading as students study a sheet of rules. One teacher, Mr. G., then reviews the rules, testing students for comprehension, vocabulary, and math. "What is the topic sentence?" and "How long will each team take?" are some beginning questions. He asks, too, "What does 'fictional' mean?" and "Give me an example of...." moving students in the direction of understanding common ground rules for the activity ahead while reviewing basic academic skills.

This is a game of "friendly competition," requiring the class to divide into teams, each with two teachers supervising. Students can succeed individually, but the team's success depends on the cooperation of every member. One by one, in each small group, students come to the front of the group. Mr. B. tapes a paper with the name of a historical figure written on it on the back of each student. In turn, each student asks his team members a "yes-or-no" question until he guesses his mystery figure or until four minutes has elapsed.

"Henry Ford" is a hard one; "Harriet Tubman" is a little easier. As the students lose some of their self-consciousness about standing in front of their peers, their sense of performance comes out, their questions come faster, and Mr. B. becomes their coach. "What do you know so far?" he asks, helping the group to summarize and review. "What about age?" he suggests, "Try that category." When there is silence, he persists, "You gotta think. Don't forget to think!"

The activity works. From the smallest to the tallest, a student who attended school only two days the entire previous year, the students are getting some practice in thinking and also gaining self-confidence. Only one student is clearly not cooperating. Sulking because he is not on a team with his friends, he gives away the answer to one of the "mysteries." Mr. B. takes it in stride, begins again, and does not single the student out for special attention or rebuke although he expresses disappointment for the group. That strategy pays off. In the end the sulker understands: "You mean if I'd played, we might have won?" he asks. He does take the final turn and is triumphant when he correctly guesses "Martin Luther King."

Time is up, but the activity is not over. Wrapping up, Mr. G. helps them summarize what they have learned. He praises students from each team who volunteered to go first, and he suggests that asking questions, listening, and taking turns using each other's knowledge are good ways to learn many things.

As a balance to this high intensity group activity, the work of the morning ends in the computer room where students have a choice of a variety of software they can work with individually. Some students settle into this quickly; others are more uncertain. For some, the games may be too "babyish" or inappropriate, even when their language skills need attention. Robert, for example, chooses to play "Word Scramble" with a focus on sports. When "Running" and "Polo" appear on the screen as words he is meant to unscramble, he quickly loses interest. It is hard to tell whether the game is too difficult or whether the words are too far outside of the content he had expected. Perhaps "Basketball" or "Tackle" would have been more within his understanding of a "Sports" category. Still, he will probably be back next Saturday.

Project Promise, however, has introduced improved educational practices, not just more hours of the "same old thing," into Boston's middle schools. Highlights of the program are team teaching, interdisciplinary instruction, and flexible scheduling with more time spent on subject matter. Because teachers have had to apply for the program, teachers selected to work in Project Promise schools—the Timilty, Thompson, and Cleveland—are likely to be teachers who are committed to teaching middle grades youngsters in an innovative way.

Project Promise has attracted teachers who are committed to teaching middle grades youngsters. It has provided teachers with incentives to plan interdisciplinary activities, and it has given students increased confidence that their teachers are pushing for their success.

According to an evaluation of the first cycle of Project Promise at the Timilty School in the spring of 1986, most of the students attending Saturday classes were positive about their experience. On the other hand, the majority of students did not like the longer day although many wanted Project Promise to continue the next year.

The evaluation of Project Promise found that the lengthened teaching time, flexible scheduling, Saturday classes, parental involvement, and interdisciplinary team teaching have potential benefits for both students and teachers. These are features of successful middle schools described by Joan Lipsitz and others. The evaluation also found that the major benefit of the program was increased enthusiasm of students for learning. Increase in class participation, increase in homework assignments completed, and increase in classwork produced were cited as evidence for improved student attitudes toward school.

What is not clear, either from visits to Project Promise, or from reading the School Department's evaluation, is whether middle schools

could realize the benefits of increased student enthusiasm for school and enhanced professional growth for teachers without extending the time in school. Project Promise has attracted teachers who are committed to teaching middle grades youngsters. It has provided teachers with incentives to plan interdisciplinary activities, and it has given students increased confidence that their teachers are pushing for their success. In some respects, Project Promise has worked as a shock to the system, jolting participating schools into trying innovative teaching approaches and more flexible scheduling.

In our judgment, it is the interdisciplinary teams, teaching strategies that emphasize active, cooperative learning, and block scheduling, more than extended time by itself, that account for the program's attraction. Without these, the program would simply offer more of

the same passive approaches to learning and departmentalized organization that characterize many middle schools and that, as we have shown, are not working well for many students. Indeed, as Project Promise continues, the extended time component may become a burden to the program and undermine its potential. The School Department's own evaluation reports that discipline problems increase at the end of a long day as students tire and become more easily distracted. Teachers, too, risk burn-out with only one day a week available for rest, renewal, and personal responsibilities. Taken on top of a longer week, especially one with nine 45-minute periods each day in schools which have not yet implemented flexible scheduling, teachers may find themselves burning the candle at both ends. The dedication of these teachers, as evidenced by their volunteering for Project Promise in the first place, is too valuable to take for granted.

MACKEY MOSAIC SUMMER INSTITUTE

On an August morning, the lobby at the Mackey School is spotless. Large green potted plants stand at the foot of the stairway railings, and portraits of interracial groups of children provide bright spots of color on the walls. A banner angled upward along the entrance stairs proclaims "Welcome to the Mackey Summer Institute." At the top of the stairs, the school's gym teacher is just beginning a tour in Spanish for two incoming sixth grade students and their parents.

Inside, seven classrooms are alive with activity. The occasion is a two-week program initiated by principal Diana Lam for all incoming sixth graders. The purpose of the program is to provide a transition for students fresh from elementary school into the unfamiliar environment of the middle school. It is a chance for new students and their parents to get to know their teachers and principal and to begin to form friendships with each other. On the first day of school in September, not one of the students attending the program will feel totally alone and unknown. Each will be able to recognize at least some familiar faces both of other students and of adults.

The Mackey Summer Institute is an excellent means of easing the jolt both students and teachers experience as students move into middle school. It is a program that should be offered in every one of Boston's middle schools.

During the two-week, four-hour-per-day program, students are also exposed to the Mackey's school year program. Indeed, their summer activities are a taste of more to come and reflect what is described in the Mackey's brochure as the school's commitment to an interdisciplinary curriculum. "hinted at by the term 'mosaic'—independent but not isolated areas of investigation [which] combine to produce an overall education aesthetic." During the school year, a thematic interdisciplinary curriculum is the basis for both team teaching and flexible scheduling. During the summer, students working in small, consistent groups have a chance to explore all aspects of interdisciplinary learning, culminating in a celebration of their work which takes place the final day. When they return in September, the learning activities they have experienced in August—structured, small-group participatory learning—will not seem so strange to them.

The Institute's courses are designed to whet the intellectual curiosity of the Mackey's incoming students while attending to their developmental needs. Thus, in the math room, one group is engaged in a tournament of "Equations," a round-robin competition which is fun for the students and allows the sixth grade math teacher to assess her new students' strengths and weakness. Downstairs, other students are working intently on word processors, each student composing an essay on the topic "What I Am Like." One girl in braids has written a nearly perfect essay. Next to her, a boy whose hairstyle features a punk-style tail needs help in making corrections in punctuation and spelling. Both essays vividly describe passions for books, clothes, and baseball. The technology and small size of the group allows the language arts teacher, who is also skilled in using computers with students with special needs, to provide individual attention to each student. Those with perfect essays can expand and print out their compositions; others can revise according to teacher suggestions and see immediate improvements. Each student will have a "product" to take home, and because of the topic, each staff member will know a little more about individual student's interests before school starts. A transition program thus benefits teachers as well as students. Their first weeks in September and October are a lot less chaotic because of this investment made in August.

The Mackey Summer Institute is a cultural as well as a programmatic mosaic, reflecting the school's bilingual and bicultural orientation. Consequently, the Institute's offerings have a strong focus on introducing new students to the skills they need to get along in a multi-cultural school community. Several students, for example, are learning Spanish as a second language. As the teacher instructs each to "Toque el reloj" or "Toque el papel," they point to the picture of a clock or pick up a sheet of lined paper, matching the object to the new words they are hearing.

Art and music teachers, too, are emphasizing the multi-cultural aspect of the Mackey's curriculum. In the art class, students work intently in groups of four making pinatas and masks. In the auditorium, the music teacher

works with one group at a time preparing for the final day's celebration for which each will perform, presenting such songs as "Eres Tu" and West Side Story's "There's a Place for Us." Music then, is a means of building bridges between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students and also an activity which helps students identify with their small groups.

Even physical education is an opportunity for a bilingual experience. Working with all students during a mid-morning break, the gym teacher has organized competitive relays and ball games. For the Institute, she conducts the class in English. During the winter, students will count off "Uno, dos, tres..." under her guidance. In such ways, the cultural diversity of the student population is acknowledged and valued in all aspects of the Institute's program.

Furthermore, the emphasis on diversity is most dramatically highlighted in a two-hour session for each small group explicitly focused on multi-cultural awareness and peer leadership skills. Following a "group-building" introductory activity and a filmstrip, leaders from the Multicultural Project for Communication and Education begin a discussion focused on qualities of a leader. Students are literally on the edge of their seats, hands raised and eager to give their opinions as the discussion leaders ask, "What do you do to stand up for yourself and your friends in a way that doesn't involve fighting?" Each student has a suggestion: "Get help from a grownup," says one; "Walk away," says another. Clearly when school starts these students will be prepared with non-disruptive alternatives for handling some of the difficult situations that occur in all middle schools: peer pressure, name-calling, drug pushing, or the schoolyard bully.

At the end of this session, adult discussion leaders ask each student to fill in one sentence describing their reaction to the morning: "I was pleased that I..." "I was disappointed that I..." or "I learned that I..." No one is ignored. Without exception each student has a response. Reports that "I was pleased that I met new friends," "I learned that I shouldn't make fun of other people's clothes," and "I was disappointed that I missed school yesterday" are all testimony to the effectiveness of the exercise in helping students value their own opinions and experiences within the context of

consideration for others. Such multi-cultural awareness teaching is a model for the kind of teaching that can meet the needs of middle school students for self-exploration and for positive interaction with peers and adults. The pay-off for attending to these needs is likely to be in lower suspension rates and a more positive school climate as students feel increased commitment to each other and to "the way we do things at the Mackey."

Indeed, the intergroup awareness component of the Institute is a promising model for a homeroom guidance approach for the school as a whole. Moreover, the entire Institute is a model for an elementary-to-middle grades transition program for all Boston middle schools. For the cost of \$5000 spent in two weeks in August, the Institute makes possible a number of benefits. At the outset, a school can build bridges with students' parents through an in-take interview, a practice Diana Lam, Mackey School principal, hopes to implement in the 1987 Summer Institute. In such an interview, school staff can inform parents about the goals of the school, communicate expectations, and enlist parents help in meeting those expectations.

A two-week summer experience also increases the sense of familiarity among students and between students and faculty. By the same token, it decreases the sense of isolation and loneliness that new sixth graders can so easily feel in a school where they are "lowest in the pecking order" of the middle school. Such familiarity can circumvent the moments of chaos in a new school year that can result in disruption when 150 sixth graders arrive from many elementary schools each of which had different rules and expectations. Instead, as the school year begins, the Summer Institute becomes a common point of reference for both students and teachers who, themselves, can prepare more easily for students whom they have met and who have been exposed to the school's approach. Such benefits are also, themselves, likely to create conditions where disruptive incidents are fewer because students are more recognizable to adults and each other and because students have been exposed to the norms of the school and have been encouraged to use a variety of means to meet their needs.

With a slightly higher budget allocation, the Mackey Summer Institute could be even better. This year about half the incoming sixth grade attended. Ms. Lam believes that if transportation in the form of mini-buses were provided from major subway stops to the school, attendance rates would rise to 95%. Additional money could also pay for a teacher to do intake interviews for all students and their parents and to do outreach to students' families. In *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Council on Middle Level Education recommends that school systems identify ways to facilitate a smooth transition of students from one level to another. The Mackey Summer Institute is an excellent means of easing the jolt both students and teachers experience as students move into middle school. It is a program that should be offered in every one of Boston's middle schools. However, it is also a program which can be fully successful only to the extent that each individual school's school-year program is an extension of the "mosaic" concept with school staff committed to a school whose whole curriculum and organization is greater than the sum of its parts and whose commitment to meeting needs of all its young adolescent students drives educational decisions.

Such multi-cultural awareness teaching is a model for the kind of teaching that can meet the needs of middle school students for self-exploration and for positive interaction with peers and adults.



PHOTO: LESLIE STAROBIN

LEARNING BY EARNING/CARING BY SHARING

This Gavin School program, designed for 30-35 students at risk who are trained as tutors and then paired with 30-35 students with special needs, reflects a willingness to address the developmental needs of adolescents at risk and a commitment to directing resources toward programs which serve students most at risk. Funded with \$5,000 from the Hancock Endowment for Academics, Recreation, and Teaching, core activities of the program include support groups, individual tutoring, and training for students who are over-age for their grade and who are matched as tutors for disabled students within the school. Through a system of points earned for tutoring, tutors earn special privileges or prizes. With some aspect of the program scheduled daily, at-risk students have special reason to come to school. Peer interaction is encouraged through regular tutoring, field trips, and group experiences involving both tutors and special education students.

As designed, the program promises to meet a number of developmental needs of this age group. Tutoring and training activities for the tutors meet needs for increasing academic competence and provide vulnerable students with a meaningful role in the school community. Small support groups focus on tutoring issues, career opportunities, peer pressure, behavior, substance abuse, and issues concerning disabilities. Such groups offer opportunities for self-exploration and self-definition in a climate which supports positive social interactions with adults and other students. Individual attention and responsibilities for tutoring can enhance self-esteem and promote awareness of being valued as an important part of a larger community.

Even more promising are the institutional changes which will reinforce and complement the learning of the 60-70 students in the program. As part of a broader effort to meet the needs of at risk students, teachers will attend workshops on "Peer Tutoring and Self-Esteem Building in Middle School Students" at the University of Massachusetts and on "Adolescent Concerns and Issues" at the South Boston Multi-Service Center. Such teacher training both supports the narrow goals of the program and enhances the likelihood that all students will benefit from more sensitive attention to their developmental needs. At the same time, language arts teachers will be revising the curriculum to include a unit on disabled individuals, a second change which both complements the program for at risk students and strengthens the educational experience for all students. Finally, the program will be located in a school Study Center created with student and parent cooperation. While providing space for tutoring activities for individual students, the Center is also available to all students both during and after school.

Learning By Earning/Caring By Sharing begins officially in September 1986, so the program's effectiveness has not been tested. However, the program's development is already some indication of the Gavin's interest in meeting the needs of all its students. Principal support, teacher enthusiasm, cooperation of parents and students (the Gavin Student Council is donating \$250 for the project), and a positive working relationship with community agencies developed through an effective Student Support Team were all in place before the project began. If the program reaches its goals, the results are likely to illustrate that approaches benefitting students at risk also increase the holding power of the school for all students.

In the course of writing this report, the Center has also learned of alternative practices and policies adopted in other parts of the country that have potential of meeting the needs of students at risk in middle schools. We describe these here in the belief that Boston can learn from these approaches.

ALTERNATIVES TO NON-PROMOTION

In Los Angeles, its Board of Education has recognized that holding students back must be viewed as a last resort, used only when other alternatives prove not to be in a student's best interest. After reviewing literature which showed that many students who drop out had received failing marks in early elementary grades, and then, through subsequent years, had developed patterns of increasingly poor attendance and discipline, the Board approved policies to relieve the ill effects of holding students back.

According to Los Angeles Superintendent Harry Handler, Board of Education policies now require parental consent for retention in grades kindergarten through six. In addition, these policies, effective July 1, 1986, prohibit the use of the "F" grade in kindergarten through second grade, substituting a notation "N" when a student "needs improvement." These policies reflect the system's commitment to "practices which can prevent failure from happening at any grade level" and which "stress the need for improving instructional delivery systems, strengthening the self-image of the underachieving learner, and increasing student motivation and interest in learning." In a letter to the Massachusetts Advocacy Center, Superintendent Handler further explains that the system's thrust "continues to be to identify the reasons why acceptable levels of performance are not being attained by given students, and to initiate whatever actions hold promise of reversing impending failure."

These commitments imply that school failure is the result of school-student interaction and that prevention may be directed toward making changes in classroom conditions that frequently contribute to student failure. These policies also put the responsibility on the teacher to explain to students and parents the reasons for unsatisfactory performance and what needs to be done to prevent failing grades beyond second grade. One planned outcome of these policies is that each student will arrive at the middle grades level with a strong self-concept as a student and without a history of repeated failure.

Moreover, involvement of parents is a promising component of such a policy with special relevance to retention practices in Boston. Again and again in our interviews with middle school students we heard students report they had received no warning they would not be promoted. A required parent conference represents one mechanism to facilitate and clarify communication about the reasons for poor school performance and to enlist parents' support in their child's learning.

One planned outcome of these policies is that each student will arrive at the middle grades level with a strong self-concept as a student and without a history of repeated failure.

Middle school practices elsewhere also point toward organizational reforms which present alternatives to non-promotion. For example, schools can organize their clusters, not by grade, but in multi-age groupings which include students in all grades. In such clusters or "streams," students can progress at a pace that suits their unique learning style in a climate similar to the one-room school of earlier years with faster learners helping slower learners. Indeed, Dr. Robert Sperber and Dean Hubie Jones of Boston University along with Dr. Kenneth Haskins of Harvard University's School of Education have proposed that Boston schools implement a Continual Pupil Progress Plan. This proposal would acknowledge research findings indicating that 90 percent of the student population can learn similar material if teachers and the school system allow slower learning students more time to learn.

The authors of this proposal suggest that a major advantage to such an arrangement is that it can relieve the stigma of being over-age for grade. Moreover, the proposal suggests that within this context programs can be offered to slower learners in ways that account for different learning or teaching styles and in the recognition that some learners fail to learn new material quickly for a variety of reasons. If such a plan were to be adopted, it should also place a limit of four years on the number of years each student can spend in middle school.

MEDIATION: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SUSPENSION

Indeed, "schoolyard mediation" has a proven track record as a means of reducing conflicts and improving school climate in settings where conflicts among students often escalate into suspendable offenses.

In our survey of community services staff who work with middle schoolers, many have called for introducing meaningful alternatives to suspension in the middle schools. Some suggested that instead of "busy work" in detention, teachers should engage students in role-plays and values clarification activities which would address behaviors that disturb others. Another suggested that human services staff in schools should act as a "surrogate parent" in a disciplinary conference with the student. Another respondent suggested a school mediation program which could provide training for both students and teachers in conflict resolution.

Indeed, "schoolyard mediation" has a proven track record as a means of reducing conflicts and improving school climate in settings where conflicts among students often escalate into suspendable offenses. Albie Davis, Director of the Massachusetts Court Mediation Project and community mediator in Dorchester, has determined that students as young as fourth or fifth grade can be trained as "conflict managers" within their schools. She reports that administrators' fears that a mediation program may take up too much staff time are offset by the realization that less staff time is used on discipline. Moreover, teachers trained as mediators have increased confidence in their classroom and the school. Crucial to a successful program is a supportive principal, interested staff, students, and parents, and a program director. Evaluations of school mediation programs indicate that most schools that have implemented programs report reductions in vandalism, truancy, and dropout rates (Davis, 1984, 1985). In New York City, implementation of a mediation program in one high school resulted in a reduction in suspensions for fighting from 63 in the 1982-83 school year to 18 by 1984-85 (Koch, 1986).

Interestingly, students trained in conflict resolution skills have the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills as well. Because conflict management requires problem-solving, analysis, sorting, sequencing, and listening skills that closely parallel a core cluster of critical thinking skills, benefits of mediation activities are likely to spill over into the academic arena. Middle school mediation programs have the added advantage of meeting a variety of the developmental needs of this age group. Because mediation is essentially a peer activity, students have the opportunity to solve problems among themselves, gaining increased self-confidence as a result. Mediation follows specific guidelines, providing a clear structure for resolving conflict. Finally, a mediation program provides students with opportunities for meaningful participation in their school and community.

Schools which have introduced mediation programs have found they have special benefits in inter-cultural settings. This benefit has special attraction in Boston where students reported incidents of fighting that had begun with racial name-calling or misunderstanding. In the process of resolving conflicts, students and teachers must learn to suspend judgments associated with stereotyped expectations and listen to another point of view. Lessons learned as a result are likely to carry over into other situations.

According to Albie Davis, mediation offers a promising tool to improve a school's climate and reduce disruption. She warns, however, that mediation is best introduced in schools which already have an understanding of a continuum of consequences for misbehavior, a sense of which kinds of conflicts can and cannot trigger mediation, and a disposition to assign a large bulk of misbehaviors short of weapons and drugs to mediation. The National Association for Mediation in Education, housed at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, reports increasing interest in mediation programs for middle schools, a sign that many middle schools are on the lookout for developmentally appropriate alternatives to suspension.

A Stitch in Time: Fundamental Guidelines for Long Range Reform in Middle Schools

8



PHOTO: ©1995 WALTER S. SILVER

Recently, educators have observed that almost anything can be called "dropout prevention" (Mann, 1986). Indeed, given the large numbers of students at risk, particularly in urban schools, and given funding cuts in educational programs, any extra attention or resources which schools provide to students can arguably be considered a dropout prevention program. In Boston some of the efforts publicized as dropout prevention have included free tickets to a Red Sox game, Saturday classes, child care for the infant of a middle school student, and financial aid for college-bound students. While each of these approaches probably does capture the attention of some students who might otherwise disengage from school, they lack systematic analysis of the causes of the problem and consequently lack focus or direction.

The major finding of this report that school policies and practices put middle school students at risk demands more comprehensive

It makes little sense to design new, expensive programs for large numbers of students at risk if schools themselves hold on to practices which alienate students in the first place. In the long run, middle school reform is likely to be the most effective dropout prevention.

thinking about dropout prevention in the middle grades. Our review of School Department statistics, conversations with educators, parents and human service workers, and interviews with students lead us to propose specific principles which should guide any undertaking which lays claim to reducing the dropout rate. New dropout prevention strategies should meet these guidelines, not simply to benefit students at risk but also because attention to these principles will result in changes which benefit all students.

1. Dropout prevention strategies should focus primarily on changing school practices and policies that put students at risk.

In general terms, such a dropout prevention strategy will be designed to increase a school's holding power by creating a climate which, in every respect, promotes and enhances students' attachment to their school. Specifically, school improvement efforts should address attendance, promotion, and suspension policies and reform school practices in these areas.

Proposals for dropout prevention should show that they will improve prospects for student promotion, increase attendance, and reduce suspensions in the middle grades. It makes little sense to design new, expensive programs for large numbers of students at risk if schools themselves hold on to practices which alienate students in the first place. In the long run, middle school reform is likely to be the most effective dropout prevention.

2. Dropout prevention programs should focus on broadening and diversifying opportunities in the educational mainstream so that students with a variety of learning styles, paces and needs can experience success.

While some students on the brink of dropping out may need alternative programs, especially those 1,100 students two or more years behind their age-appropriate grade, most students can learn in a mainstream that pays attention to their individual needs and accounts for the unique developmental characteristics of young adolescents. Effective dropout prevention strategies will focus on changing the mainstream to incorporate more of the characteristics of successful alternatives including smallness-within-bigness, a curriculum related to students' real life experiences, cooperative learning activities, experiential internships with time for reflection, and counseling. This focus need not sacrifice attention to critical thinking, problem solving, or reading, writing, and computing skills. However, schools must offer a variety of paths to reach grade-appropriate skill levels. Some students learn best by listening; others learn visually; others learn by working with their hands. An additional number of students have special needs.

When these differences are acknowledged and seen as assets rather than liabilities, more students will have the opportunity to experience success, not just once but in an ongoing way.

Without a commitment to broadening the educational mainstream, our schools run the risk of becoming part of an increasingly two-tiered educational system. Schools can add on more specialized programs and in the process create the illusion of meeting a diverse range of student needs. Such programs, however, can easily become sorting mechanisms as students are labeled and selected out for various add-on resources. From there, it is only a short step for real students with individual identities to become part of a category and treated as different from other students.

Already, statistics gathered by the Massachusetts Department of Education's Division of Special Education show that Boston has an increasing percentage of its special education students in substantially separate classes. The Department has also reported that many students for whom English is not a first language linger in bilingual classes longer than expected. In part this happens because "traditional" education has so narrowed that it does not easily accommodate students who are different. Parents and teachers alike are thus tempted to keep vulnerable students in protected settings rather than expose them to a hostile or incompatible mainstream.

Add-on programs also raise the potential for "creaming," the process of selecting the most able students from the at-risk group for a limited number of spaces in a specialized or alternative program. "Creaming" is tempting because it raises the likelihood that a program

If nothing else, the message of this report has been that the number of students at risk is simply too great to create enough add-on programs to meet the need. It is not a few "deviant" students who are dropping out of Boston's schools; it is nearly the majority!

will be able to show a high success rate and therefore justify its existence. Pressure to show success can have the effect of denying needed but scarce resources to the most severely alienated students.

Finally, if nothing else, the message of this report has been that the number of students at risk is simply too great to create enough

add-on programs to meet the need. It is not a few "deviant" students who are dropping out of Boston's schools; it is nearly the majority! Working harder at doing more of the same is not likely to hold students' interest. In the long run, efforts to strengthen, diversify, and humanize the mainstream offer better prospects for reducing the dropout rate.

3. Dropout prevention strategies should be developed on a school-by-school basis with the involvement of teachers, parents, students, administrative staff and community workers at that school.

Our findings indicate that different students become alienated at different schools for different reasons. Consequently, a middle school improvement project for the purpose of increasing attendance and decreasing students' encounters with rejection practices of suspension and non-promotion will take one form at the Cleveland or McCormack, for example, and a different form at the Curley or Gavin Schools. While leadership about expectations for school improvement may come from Central Office, plans for ways to achieve specific goals should emerge from a process rooted in the school community and monitored by school officials and the community. Traditional schools should be encouraged to take risks in coming up with new approaches to strengthening bonds between students and their school. If mistakes are made in the process, they should be evaluated and shared with other schools in a climate of openness.

Reasonable boldness, in other words, should be encouraged.

Some schools will need help with this process. Not all principals, for example, necessarily have the skills in planning or group facilitation necessary for such an undertaking. When this is the case, school officials should provide technical assistance in the form of process consultation and leadership training for the school-based planning committee.

Boston's experience with its own School Improvement Project is evidence that such a project can work. Moreover, School Improvement Councils as mandated by Chapter 188, the Public Education Improvement Act of 1985, are potential vehicles for developing such strategies. This report's findings regarding school attendance, suspension, and non-promotion can serve as a basis for discussions about the direction each school might take.

4. Dropout prevention strategies at the middle grades level must take into account the normal developmental needs of young adolescents.

When the focus of dropout prevention is on school structures, practices, and policies, proposed changes should be judged against the likelihood that they will complement rather than clash with the variety of needs of students who are moving quickly from childhood into adolescence. When structural changes take into account young adolescents' needs for structure and limits, diversity, competence, self-esteem, interaction with peers and adults, meaningful participation in school decision-making, and physical activity, and when schools move toward ensuring that school organization meets these needs for *all* students, the school will increase its holding power.

By the same token, programs designed specifically for vulnerable students should also consider ways in which specific features of the program—staffing, curriculum, and teaching approach—take these needs into account. In particular, such programs should have a strong component to help students regain self-esteem lost through negative school experiences. Attention to feelings of self-worth is crucial for students who have developed a "school-is-not-for-me" perspective. Without such support, students who may, indeed, have to "try harder," will find themselves working against their own low expectations in their efforts to succeed.

5. Dropout prevention strategies must acknowledge the broad cultural diversity and richness of Boston's student population.

Both our interviews with students and our statistical data indicate that attention to the cultural richness of Boston's students is crucial to the success of dropout prevention efforts in the City. As one educator and community worker with close ties to the Hispanic community insists, "We desperately need educators who see students' differences as opportunities for learning not as deficiencies." Achieving this will require training for school staff and the development of new learning opportunities for students.

As one educator and community worker with close ties to the Hispanic community insists, "We desperately need educators who see students' differences as opportunities for learning not as deficiencies."

Boston's student population now reflects great diversity. In addition to whites and American blacks, increasingly large numbers of students identify themselves as Hispanic—including Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Colombian—as well as West Indian, Haitian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Chinese, and Native American. For some, their presence in Boston's schools reflects an ongoing, long-term residence in the City; for others it represents a more recent immigrant experience. These students bring to our schools a depth and richness of experience that is rarely or only superficially used to strengthen the educational experience of all students.

In fact, in the name of equal treatment and non-discriminatory practices, cultural differences are more likely to be ignored than used creatively. For example, Patti DeRosa, Director of the Multicultural Project for Communication and Education which has provided training for both school systems and community groups, maintains that cultural differences and race are like family secrets, something everyone is aware of but no one talks about. While some school staff may believe that drawing attention to racial issues might make students uncomfortable, the reverse is more likely to be true. Students live with exposure and references to race in their daily lives. Failure to

acknowledge these issues in school can actually devalue students' experiences. In contrast, educators who are willing to discuss openly such topics as stereotyping, discrimination, and inter-group conflict act to expand learning opportunities and build bridges that span experiences students have outside the school with their academic experience.

Attention to multi-cultural issues must also be reflected in staff assignments. For example, as Jim Cummins has pointed out in his *Harvard Educational Review* article "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention" of February 1986, teachers may need to work closely with bilingual, bicultural aides who know intimately students' language and cultural background. Teachers who can reject the assumption that teaching is a job that belongs to them alone and can share responsibilities in a multicultural team are more likely to engage students in their schooling.

No school with students whose home language is not English should be without staff who can communicate school concerns to parents or address students' needs in an emergency. The failure to provide such staff can result in students' isolation in an emergency, a situation that occurred in the past year at the Edwards Middle School when a Hispanic student attempted suicide and no adult in the school was able to contact his Spanish-speaking family. Moreover, such staff should be bicultural as well as bilingual to avoid alienating not only students but also their families from the school culture. For example, a school official's last-minute decision not to allow an eighth grade Hispanic student to participate in middle school graduation ceremonies because of a technicality can disrupt an entire family for whom completion of eighth grade may be the highest honor. New clothes purchased, visits from out-of-town relatives, and family celebrations are all suddenly diminished by arbitrary decisions of school staff who fail to understand the importance of the event within the context of the student's culture. Such insensitivity can undermine not only students' sense of belonging in school but also parents' faith in Boston's schools and willingness to interact with the school on subsequent occasions.

6. Dropout prevention strategies must include parents in meaningful roles.

As Virginia Smithers, Executive Director of Boston's Citywide Parents Council has said, "If parents are part of the problem, we need to be part of the solution."

Most parents have high hopes for their children and want to be involved in their educational progress. Moreover, Jim Cummins reports that when parents are actively involved in their children's education, students' performance improves. Even simple measures can have positive impact. For example, Cummins reports that in one study in Britain, parents contracted to listen to their children read aloud to them daily, including parents who were not literate or English-speaking. Children engaged in this approach actually made greater progress than children in small-group reading instruction. In addition, teachers reported that students who read to their parents on a daily basis showed increased interest in learning and were better behaved. Such data demonstrate that involvement of parents does not have to be complicated to have an impact.

In addition, parents should be involved at every level in developing school-based dropout prevention programs and in school improvement projects. Dropout prevention is an appropriate agenda item for School Improve-

ment Councils which can receive ten dollars from the state for every child enrolled in the school to use in whatever way they decide is useful. School-Parent Councils can also work actively on any school assessment leading to school reform. In Boston, Project Promise schools have pioneered the hiring of parent liaisons to engage parents in efforts to improve student achievement. Such positions should be incorporated into every school.



PHOTO: SOMERVILLE MEDIA ACTION PROJECT

7. Dropout prevention strategies should actively collaborate with community-based human service agencies to provide services for students at risk in middle schools and to expand programs offered to all students.

Some community organizations are already working closely with middle schools through the Boston Student Human Services Collaborative. Other community organizations can also be engaged to provide staff development and offer programs which would not otherwise be available to a school.

The obvious benefit to involving community organizations in Boston's middle schools is that such collaboration expands the support services available to young adolescents and can fill glaring gaps in existing resources. For example, Boston currently assigns only 28 full-time, English-speaking guidance counselors to 23 middle schools, including two assigned to the McKinley Middle School. Only five of these guidance counselors are black. The ratio of non-bilingual counselors to middle school students is 392:1.

Even worse, although one full-time Hispanic guidance counselor is assigned to the McKinley Middle School, nine other middle schools each have only one part-time Spanish-speaking guidance worker, assigned an average of less than two days a week to each school. This assignment pattern leaves some middle schools with significant enrollments of Hispanic students completely without bilingual, bicultural guidance services. Hispanic students at the Lewis, Roosevelt, Dearborn, Gavin, Barnes, and Wheatley Schools, for example, where the percentage of Hispanic students is greater than ten percent of all students enrolled, have no Spanish-speaking guidance counselor available. Even in schools where Hispanic students speak English, this gap in services means that existing guidance

approaches cannot include Spanish-speaking parents in designing strategies to help students at risk. Moreover, the only Hispanic nurse assigned to middle schools provides coverage at the Lewis only one day each week. Clearly, Boston's middle schools are woefully lacking in support services for the 18% of its students who are Hispanic, a population at increasing risk of dropping out and which is already disproportionately represented in the dropout population. Increased collaboration with independent organizations in the Hispanic community could begin to address these needs.

Collaboration with community agencies can benefit all students by meeting needs which public schools cannot address. Staff in community organizations can provide counseling, outreach to parents, and concrete resources such as tutoring to help individual students whose attendance or academic records suggest they are at risk. Community workers can also act as "surrogate parents" for disciplined students whose parents may be unavailable.

While the obvious role for human service agencies is to provide one-to-one or group

counseling services, community-based organizations can also offer programmatic resources to enrich the education of all students. Organizations like Dorchester's Little House, for example, have many years of experience in designing drug, alcohol, and family life education programs for young adolescents. The Cambridge-based Multicultural Project in Communication and Education has extensive experience in teacher training related to cross-cultural educational issues. The Dorchester Youth Collaborative has designed and implemented an effective mediation program that could be adapted for use in middle schools. When Boston's middle schools choose to ignore available community-based resources, they limit opportunities for enriching the school climate and helping individual students.

We believe that the School Department's adoption of these principles is crucial to reversing the dropout trend. The guidelines are few, but their implications are broad. We believe they offer a platform for change which every sector of the community can endorse.

Policies and Practices in Middle Schools: Recommendations for Change

9

In the long run, we believe that well-run middle schools which meet the developmental needs of their young adolescent students and which strive to create a non-discriminatory, accepting climate will appropriately address attendance, behavioral, and promotion problems. We recommend that Boston Public

Schools embark on a long-range process of middle school reform.

In addition, recognizing that existing policies and practices pose barriers to students' success in middle schools, we recommend the following immediate changes:

LEADERSHIP

- 1. We recommend the Boston School Committee adopt the fundamental principles which we have proposed for long range reform in middle schools.**

These principles should also be used as guidelines for designing any new approaches to dropout intervention.

- 2. We recommend that school officials require each middle school to conduct a school-based assessment of existing**

conditions, practices, and policies which put students at risk in each school.

A school-based assessment team in each middle school should include staff from all levels of the school as well as parents, students, and community workers. Assessments should require specific attention to attendance, discipline, promotion, and school climate factors which may discourage student engagement in each school.

ATTENDANCE

- 1. We recommend elimination of non-promotion as a response to poor attendance.**

Academic punishment, whether non-promotion or reduction in grade, for poor attendance does not address the causes of truancy. Attendance of less than 15% in any quarter should trigger an immediate assessment of student needs and an immediate student-parent-conference. Changes in classroom placement should be considered as well as services which emphasize immediate, personal, and persistent communication with the students' parents in the language of the home.

- 2. We recommend early and immediate school response to student absence.**

Every single student absence should trigger a call to each student's home. Current policy calling for communication to the home following three days absence allows too much time to pass before contact is made between the school and home. Schools should have back-up telephone numbers for each student in the event that parents are not at home during the day, cannot be called at work, or do not have a telephone.

- 3. We recommend that schools respond to tardiness in ways that do not encourage further attendance problems.**

All students should be admitted to school upon arrival and given a pass to class. Tardy rooms result in students' missing classwork that need not have been missed. Schools should never require students arriving late to return home for a written explanation of their tardiness. Schools must devise alternative means to correct tardy behavior that do not have academic consequences.

- 4. We recommend an individualized student assessment for students who are persistently tardy.**

Persistent tardiness can slip into truancy and is a signal that a student needs special attention.

- 5. We recommend that schools devise a system of rewards to acknowledge students whose attendance improves during the school year.**

Current policy cannot deter slippage of students over the school year, and indeed, as we have documented encourages poor attendance.

6. We recommend that attendance data be collected and reported by race.

Collapsing Hispanic and Asian students into an "Other" category hides the significantly different patterns of attendance for these groups. By the same token, attendance rates for each school as a whole mask the extent to which some groups are at greater risk for attendance reasons than others in the same school.

NON-PROMOTION

1. We recommend that non-promotion be eliminated as an option in the middle grades.

Students should be placed in age-appropriate grades and provided necessary remedial assistance to acquire basic skills. Non-promotion clearly results in attendance and behavioral problems which together result in dropping out.

2. We recommend structural changes in middle schools, such as multi-age grouping within clusters, that reduce the stigma of students who are over-age for grade.

The implementation of a Continual Student Progress Plan and introduction of cooperative learners approaches can further reduce isolation of slower learners in the middle grades. We caution against any approach to tracking or ability grouping that will further label these students who have already experienced early educational failure.

3. We recommend the expansion of RECAP services to every middle school and for every middle school student two years or more behind age for grade.

These students are among the students at greatest risk of dropping out.

7. We recommend that Boston Public Schools collect and publish attendance information by racial group based on the percentage of time students are absent.

Percentage of time absent should be defined as the number of days students are absent in relation to the number of days they are enrolled in school for each school term. This definition accounts for students who enroll late in the year as well as student mobility within the system.

4. We recommend that all students age 16 or older in middle school be immediately offered a place in an alternative program.

These students are in imminent danger of dropping out. Alternative middle level programs where school and teacher cultures conform to the characteristics of successful alternative models—similar to Dorchester's Log School or Little House Alternative School—should be established in every district.

5. We recommend that Boston Public Schools include in the annual School Profiles the numbers of students who are behind their age-appropriate grade for two or more years in each middle school.

Publication of this data can benefit both school planners and community organizations who are designing programs for high risk students. Moreover, such information is a measure of the extent to which students arrive in middle schools following substantial educational delay in elementary school.

SUSPENSION

- 1. We recommend that out-of-school suspension be used only for students who carry weapons or use drugs in school or where assaultive behavior will result in criminal charges.**

Suspensions for other reasons may be an indication of a school climate that is not addressing needs of students or lack of ability of teachers to manage classrooms appropriately. Students cannot learn new behavior when they are not in school.

- 2. We recommend that schools develop alternatives to suspension—in-school or out-of-school—that emphasize conflict-resolution, problem-solving, and mediation.**

Alternative approaches to school discipline should emphasize learning of new behaviors and skills rather than exclusion.

- 3. We recommend that schools be required to report the number of students referred for suspension from each teacher in the school**

to identify teachers who need training and support in classroom management or teaching techniques.

- 4. We recommend that numbers of students referred for in-school suspension be reported by race and referring teacher for each school and that parents be informed of any in-school suspension.**

Furthermore, Boston Public Schools should issue guidelines for in-school suspension programs and require any school using in-school suspension to file a plan with the Central Office that conforms to these guidelines.

- 5. We recommend the collection and publication of suspension data based on both the number of suspensions and the number of students suspended in each school.**

Schools should be required to report this data in such a way as to indicate the distribution of multiple suspensions which would show the numbers of students at risk and the severity of risk due to suspension.

- 6. We recommend the collection of suspension data by special education status and the immediate review of I.E.P.s of special education students after three suspensions.**

Findings on suspensions at the McKinley raise concerns that special education students are at risk for similar treatment wherever their placement.

MCKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

- 1. We recommend an immediate and rigorous program audit by the State Department of Education of the McKinley Middle School.**

Because of the extraordinary and persistent history of overuse of suspension for some of the system's most vulnerable students, the audit team should include parents, special education advocates, and independent special education consultants.

- 2. We recommend that Massachusetts Department of Education and Department of Mental Health officials develop standards of treatment for students in substantially separate programs, including the McKinley schools.**

Currently, for example, no independent standards exist regarding the impact of suspension on mental health needs of emotionally disturbed students.

Appendix A: Summary of Data Collected

SCHOOL YEAR	TYPE OF DATA	SOURCE	AVAILABLE FROM:
1982-83 1983-84 1984-85	Average yearly Attendance Rate, which is the average percentage of the student body attending on any given school day. Computed for the total school enrollment and for each racial group for the twenty-four middle schools	Yearly averages computed from the ten monthly attendance computer print-outs: "Boston Public Schools ADM/ADM ¹ Attendance (month)"	Boston Public Schools Central Office, Department of Implementation (school years 1982-83, 1983-84); Boston Citywide Parent Council Research Unit Coordinator (school year 1984-85)
1984-85 1985-86	Number of students, totals and totals by race, absent for each of the following categories of time for each term and for the entire school year: 0-15%, 16-20%, 21-50%, 51+ %. Twenty-four middle schools ²	Computer print-out: "Student Attendance Report by Race Percentage of Days Absent for the 1984-85 School Year Marking Period 1" (printouts for each marking period and year final, years 1984-85 and 1985-86)	Prepared by special request: Boston Public Schools, Central Office, Department of Information Services
1984-85 1985-86	Number of total days absent and number of total days enrolled for each racial group and overall student population for the four school terms and entire school year. Twenty-four middle schools	Same as above	Same as above
1984-85	Number of Children in Need of Services petitions filed on middle school students by Boston Public Schools attendance officers, totals and totals by race	Computed on request by the attendance unit from raw data collected by the Department	Boston Public Schools, Central Office, Attendance Department
1982-83 1983-84 1984-85	Number of students not promoted, totals and totals by race, the twenty-four middle schools, June figures	Computer print-outs: "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade Nonpromotees"	Boston Public Schools, Central Office, Department of Implementation
1984-85	Number of students in 6th grade 14 years or older, in 7th grade 15 years or older, in 8th grade 16 years or older, totals and totals by race, twenty-four middle schools	Computer print-outs: Boston Public Schools "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade, Middle Schools 14 years and Over" "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade, Middle Schools 15 Years and Over" "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade, Middle Schools 16 Years and Over"	Citywide Parents Council, Research Unit Coordinator
1983-84 1984-85	Number of students who drop out (age 16 or over), totals and totals by race, twenty-four middle schools	Prepared on request by Guidance and Support Team Services, "Middle School Dropout Statistics"	Boston Public Schools, Central Office, Department of Guidance and Support Team Services
1982-83 1983-84 1984-85	Number of suspensions for the school year, totals and totals by race, twenty-four middle schools	Computer print-outs: "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade Suspensions by Suspending School"	Boston Public Schools, Central Office, Department of Implementation
1982-83 1983-84 1984-85	Number of students suspended, school year, totals and totals by race, twenty-four middle schools	Computer print-outs: "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade, Suspensions, One Record per Student"	Same as above
1982-83 1983-84 1984-85	End of the year enrollment—totals and totals by race for the twenty-four middle schools in the Boston Public School System	Computer print-outs: "Analysis of Students by Race by Grade"	Same as above

1. ADA—Average Daily Attendance
ADM—Average Daily Membership

2. Two of the middle schools were closed school year 1985-86.

Appendix B: Explanation of the Data

ATTENDANCE	
Attendance Rate:	Defined as the percentage of enrolled students attending on the average on any given school day. The yearly average attendance rates presented in this report were calculated from the ten monthly attendance rates. Monthly attendance rates are the ratio of the average daily attendance, ADA, to the average daily membership (enrollment), ADM, expressed as a percentage.
Percentage of Time Absent:	Based on the number of days students were absent in relation to the number of days they were eligible (i.e. enrolled). Time absent categories used were: 0-15%, 16-20%, 21-50%, 51+ %.
Percentage of Students in Each Time Absent Category:	The ratio of the number of students in each time absent category to the number of students across all time absent categories, expressed as a percentage.
Percentage of Learning Time Lost:	Based on the total number of days absent across all students in relation to the total number of days eligible (enrolled), expressed as a percentage.
NON-PROMOTION	
Percentage of Students Not Promoted:	The ratio of the number of students not promoted to the total number of students enrolled, expressed as a percentage. This number indicates the number of students not promoted per 100 students enrolled.
Percentage of All Students Not Promoted By Racial Group:	The ratio of the number of students not promoted within each racial group to the total number of students not promoted, expressed as a percentage. This percentage is the number of students for the racial group not promoted per 100 non promotions.
DROPOUT	
Dropout Rate:	The ratio of the number of students age 16 or over who officially withdraw from middle school to the total number of students age 16 or over enrolled in middle school, expressed as a percentage.
SUSPENSION	
Student Suspension Rate:	The ratio of the number of students suspended to the number of students enrolled, expressed as a percentage. In other words, the rate is the number of students suspended per 100 students enrolled.
School Suspension Rate:	The ratio of the number of suspensions to the number of students enrolled, expressed as a percentage. This rate is the number of suspensions per 100 students enrolled.
Percentage of All Students Suspended by Racial Group:	Based on the number of students suspended within each racial group in relation to the total number of students suspended, expressed as a percentage. This number indicates the percentage of all students suspended accounted for by each racial group.
STUDENT POPULATION	
Enrollment:	Updated enrollment figures by race by grade are calculated approximately every two weeks by the central office of Boston Public Schools. Final enrollment figures are calculated at the end of the school year. End of the year enrollment data were used to compute suspension and nonpromotion rates.
NASs and DNRs:	Boston public school students must enroll at the central office level. Students are designated "newly assigned students," NASs, until they attend their assigned schools at least once. One month from enrollment, students who still have not attended their assigned school at least once, are then considered "do not reports," DNRs. Enrollment printouts from the Central Office indicate how many students have 'NAS' or 'DNR' status.
Percentage of Students above Age for Grade:	The ratio of the number of students two years above appropriate age for their assigned grade to the total number of students enrolled. Above age for grade was defined as 14+ for 6th grade, 15+ for 7th grade, and 16+ for 8th grade. Data for 14 and 15 year olds were made available in Feb. 1985, for 16 year olds in June 1985. Since data were based on current students, corresponding enrollments were used to calculate percentages.
SYSTEMWIDE DATA	
Attendance, Suspension and Non-Promotion:	All systemwide information presented was based on data collected on the twenty-four middle ¹ schools in the Boston Public School system. Middle schools were defined as those schools with a 6th, 7th, and 8th grade structure. Data on students in these grades who attend schools in the system with a different grade structure (eg. K-8 or 7-12) were not included in this analysis.

1. Two of the twenty-four middle schools, the Michelangelo and the Cheverus, were closed in school year 1985-86.

Appendix C: Additional Sources of Information

Surveys

Thirty-six community service agencies representing Boston's diverse neighborhoods responded to a survey. Survey results provided information regarding community support resources available to middle school students and agency perspectives on detrimental and helpful middle school policies and practices.

Interviews

Thirty-one middle grade students were interviewed regarding their experiences in Boston's middle schools. Information was elicited on such issues as teacher effectiveness, school organization, curriculum, and attendance, promotion, and discipline policies. Interviewees represented students from the following Boston middle schools: Curley, Dearborn, Edwards, Gavin, Irving, Lewenberg, Mackey, McCormack, Roosevelt, Taft, Thompson, Timilty, Wheatley, Little House Alternative School, and EdCo Youth Alternative.

Additional information was also provided through interviews and correspondence with the following individuals:

Richard Allen	Director, Attendance Department, Boston Public Schools
Mary Black	Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion
Kenneth Caldwell	Director, Student Support Services, Boston Public Schools
Joe Carpineto	Director, Log School Alternative School
DeeDee Costello	Director, Little House Alternative School
Rudolph Crew	Deputy Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction, Boston Public Schools
Ted Dooley	Private Industry Council
Stephen Driscoll	Principal, Buker Middle School, Wenham
Philip Dushku	Director, RECAP program
Michael Fung	Principal, Taft Middle School, Boston Public Schools
Mary Grassa O'Neill	Presently, Principal, Timilty Middle School; formerly, Middle School Coordinator, Boston Public Schools
Michael Griffin	Director, Back to School, Boston Community Schools Program
Karen Kane	Administrative Coordinator, Adolescent School Health Project
Diana Lam	Principal, Mackey Middle School, Boston Public Schools
Ronald Spratling	Principal, Thompson Middle School, Boston Public Schools
Gregory Thomas	Principal, Edwards Middle School, Boston Public Schools

Bibliography

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AT RISK

- Camayd-Freixas, Yohel, *A Working Document on the Dropout Problem in Boston Public Schools*, Boston: Boston Public Schools, May 1986.
- Center for the Study of Social Policy, *Dropping Out of High School: A Literature Review*, Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy, June 1986.
- Edmonds, Ronald, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," *Educational Leadership*, October 1979.
- Fine, Michelle, "Dropping Out of High School: An Inside Look," *Social Policy*, 16, (2), Fall 1985.
- Fine, Michelle, "Perspectives on Inequity: Voices from Urban Schools," in L. Bickman (ed.), *Applied Social Psychology Annual*, IV, Beverly Hills, CA, Sage: 1981.
- Fine, Michelle, "Why Urban Adolescents Drop into and out of Public High School," *Teachers College Record*, 87, (3), Spring 1986.
- Mann, Dale, "Can We Help Dropouts: Thinking about the Undoable," *Teachers College Record*, 87, (3), Spring 1986.
- Wehlage, Gary and Rutter, Robert, "Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?," *Teachers College Record*, 87, (3), Spring 1986.
- Wehlage, Gary, "The Marginal High School Student: Defining the Problem and Searching for Policy," *Children and Youth Services Review*, 5, 1983.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

- Boston Public Schools, Deputy Superintendent's Memorandum, *Attendance Procedure*, September 3, 1985.
- Boston Public Schools, *Education Review*, 1, (3), November 1985.
- Weitzman, Michael, et al., "Demographic and Educational Characteristics of Inner City Middle School Problem Absence Students," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 55, (3), July 1985.
- Weitzman, Michael, et al., "School Absence: A Problem for the Pediatrician," *Pediatrics*, 69, (6), June 1982.

NON-PROMOTION

- Boston Public Schools, *Promotion Policy, Grades 1-12*, January 1984.
- Camayd-Freixas, Yohel, *A Working Document on the Dropout Problem in Boston Public Schools*, Boston: Boston Public Schools, May 1986.
- Doss, David A., "Holding Power of Ninth-Grade Courses," paper prepared for the Office of Research and Evaluation, Austin (Tex.) Independent School District, 1983.
- Felice, Lawrence G., "Black Student Dropout Behavior: Disengagement from School, Rejection, and Racial Discrimination," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 50, (4), Fall 1984.
- Goodlad, John I., *A Place Called School*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.
- "Cooperative Learning," *The Harvard Education Letter*, 11, (5), September 1986.
- Holmes, C. T., "The Fourth R: Retention," *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 17 (1), 1983.
- Holmes, C. T. and Matthews, K.M., "The Effects of Non-Promotion on Elementary and Junior High School Pupils: A Meta-Analysis," *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 1984.
- Jackson, G. B., "The Research Evidence on the Effects of Grade Retention," *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 1975.

- Labaree, D. F., "Setting the Standard: The Characteristics and Consequences of Alternative Student Promotional Policies," Executive Summary, Philadelphia: Citizens' Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia, 1983.
- Mann, Dale, "Can We Help Drop-Outs: Thinking about the Undoable," *Teachers College Record*, 87, 1986.
- Moran, Lyn, "Some Are More Equal Than Others," *What's Noteworthy on School Improvement*, Kansas City, MO: Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory, Summer 1981.
- Niklasen, L. B., "Non-Promotion: A Pseudoscientific Solution," *Psychology in the Schools*, 21, 1984.
- Oakes, Jeannie, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Reinherz, Helen and Griffin, Carol L., "The Second Time Around: Achievement and Progress of Boys who Repeated One of the First Three Grades," *School Counselor*, January 1970.
- Rose, Janet, et. al., "A Fresh Look at the Retention-Promotion Controversy," *Journal of School Psychology*, 21, 1983.
- Schuyler, Nancy B. and Matter, Kevin M., "To Retain or Not to Retain: Should Achievement be your Guide?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, 1983.
- Stevenson, Chris, "Teachers as Inquirers," College of Education and Social Services, University of Vermont, unpublished manuscript.
- Walker, N.M., "Elementary School Grade Retention: Avoiding Abuses Through Systematic Decision-Making," *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 18, 1984.
- Weitzman, Michael, M.D. et al., "Demographic and Educational Characteristics of Inner City Middle School Problem Absence Students," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 55, (3), July 1985.

SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

- Boston Commission on Safe Public Schools, *Making Our Schools Safer for Learning*, Boston: Boston Commission on Safe Public Schools, 1983.
- Camayd-Freixas, Yohel, "A Working Document on the Dropout Problem in Boston Public Schools," Boston: Boston Public Schools, 1986.
- Children's Defense Fund, *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?*, Cambridge: CDF, Washington Research Project, 1975.
- "City to Probe Allegations of 'Problem Classroom,'" *Boston Globe*, July 24, 1986.
- Dorman, Gayle, "Improving Schools for Young Adolescents," *Educational Leadership*, March 1985.
- Epstein, J.L., (Ed.), *The Quality of School Life*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1981.
- Felice, Lawrence G., "Black Student Dropout Behavior: Disengagement from School, Rejection, and Racial Discrimination," *Journal of Negro Education*, 50, 1981.
- Gottfredson, Denise C., "Environmental Change Strategies to Prevent School Disruption," Johns Hopkins University, Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Paper prepared for the American Psychological Association, August 24, 1984.
- Kaesler, Susan C., "Suspensions in School Discipline," *Education and Urban Society*, 11 (4), August 1979.
- Massachusetts Advocacy Center, *Double Jeopardy: The Plight of Minority Students in Special Education*, Boston: Mass. Advocacy Center, 1978.
- National Coalition of Advocates for Students, *Barriers to Excellence in Education: Our Children at Risk*, Boston: National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985.
- "Racism Charged in Hub School Discipline," *Boston Globe*, November 12, 1981.
- Wehlage, Gary A. and Rutter, Robert A., "Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?," *Teachers College Record*, 87, (3), Spring 1986.

McKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Boston Public Schools, *Code of Discipline*, 1982.

Camayd-Freixas, Yohel, "A Working Document on the Dropout Problem in Boston Public Schools," Boston: Boston Public Schools, 1986.

Fine, Michelle, "Perspectives on Inequity: Voices from Urban Schools," L. Bickman (ed.), *Applied Social Psychology Annual, IV*, Sage: Beverly Hills, 1981.

Foley, Eileen and Crull, Peggy, *Educating the At-Risk Adolescent: More Lessons from*

Alternative High Schools, New York Public Education Association, 1984.

Massachusetts Board of Education, *Policy on Disciplining Special Education Students*, Massachusetts Department of Education, August 27, 1985.

Task Force on Children Out of School, *The Way We Go to School: The Exclusion of Children in Boston*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

Wehlage, Gary, *Effective Programs for the Marginal High School Student*, Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa, 1983.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS AND MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM

Dorman, Gayle, *Middle Grades Assessment Program*, Carrboro, NC: Center for Early Adolescence, 1984.

Edmonds, Ronald, "Programs of School Improvement: An Overview," *Educational Leadership*, December 1982.

Edmonds, Ronald, "School Effects and Teacher Effects," *Social Policy*, Fall 1984.

Fruchter, Norm, *Meeting Adolescent Need: Four Effective Middle Schools*, New York: Advocates for Children of New York, 1986.

Lipsitz, Joan, *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984.

Massachusetts Advocacy Center, *Our Children at Risk: The Crisis in Public Education*, Boston: Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1984.

National Association of Secondary School Principals, Council on Middle Level Education, *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, Reston, VA: NASSP, ND.

National Middle School Association, *This We Believe*, Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1985.

Sizemore, Barbara A., "The Effective School: African American Style," from *An Abashing Anomaly: The High Achieving Predominantly Black Elementary School* by Barbara A. Sizemore, Carlos A. Brossard and Birney Harr, Report for the National Institute of Education, 1983.

Sizemore, Barbara A., "Pitfalls and Promises of Effective Schools Research," *Journal of Negro Education*, 54, (3), 1985.

Thomason, Julia, "Nurturing the Nature of Early Adolescents—or a Day at the Zoo," *Middle Schools Journal*, XV, (4), August 1984.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Davis, Albie and Porter, Kit, "Dispute Resolution: The Fourth 'R,'" *Journal of Dispute Resolution*, 31, 1984.

Davis, Albie and Porter, Kit, "Tales of Schoolyard Mediation," *Update on Law-Related Education*, 9, (1), Winter, 1985.

Haskins, Kenneth; Jones, Hubie; and Sperber, Robert, "A Statement of Concerns Regarding the Boston Public Schools"

Promotional Policy and a Proposed Response," Photocopied paper, January 17, 1984.

Koch, Moses S., "Schools can replace Gladiators with Mediators," *Education Week*, April 2, 1986.

Weber, William M. and Robinson, Christine, "Project Promise Evaluation for the Boston Public Schools," July 11, 1986.

COVER PHOTOS: JOAN ALBERT, LOG SCHOOL; LESLIE STAROBIN